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TRAVEL & style

Your Ultimate Guide to
Niigata, Japan

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FESTIVAL PLANNER
ART AND CULTURE

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Above Niigata's stunning Mount Myoko © Krishna.Wu/Shutterstock

Blessed with ski fields, gem-like islands, a long cultural history, hot springs and wonderful cultural traditions, Niigata prefecture is one of Japan's most inspiring and interesting destinations. Jump on a bullet train in Tokyo and you'll arrive in the city of Niigata in just 70 minutes, with a wealth of adventures and attractions awaiting nearby.

Many come in winter to enjoy the popular snow resorts of Echigo-Yuzawa, while others love the delights of spring: the cherry blossoms (among the best displays and *sakura* festivals in the country), and the light dappled over the prefecture's famous terraced rice paddies.

Beyond the mountains and gardens, the Niigata coastline is lined with pretty

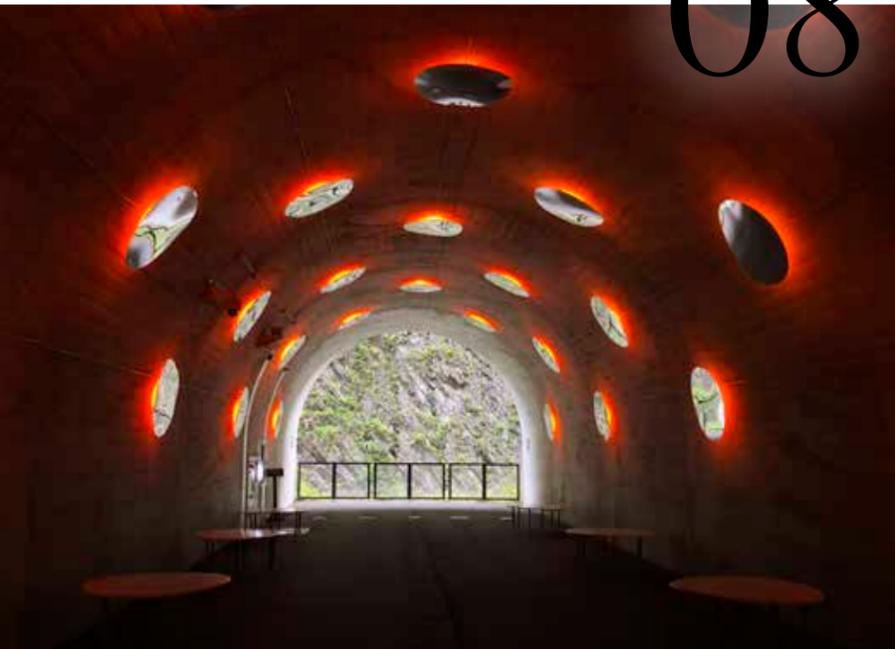
beaches and ports, with ferries whisking visitors over to the cultural hub of Sado Island. This is the birthplace of noh theatre, a time-honoured performance tradition still nurtured to this day.

In between there are music festivals, fireworks shows and epic arts events, including the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (July to mid-September 2021), an outdoor exhibition of works by world-famous artists. This year's special event will coincide with the 2021 Summer Olympic Games – a stop here before or after sporting events is a must!

And then there's the delicious food, with seafood, rice and sake rice wine all local specialties.

From the *Enjoy Niigata* team, we look forward to welcoming you back to Niigata soon.

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Clockwise from top left: Tunnel of Light © Patrick St. Michael; A noh performance on Sado island; Sado Island © Lucy Dayman



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WELCOME TO NIIGATA

Within easy reach of Tokyo, this Japanese prefecture has it all: mountains and rice fields, art and culture, festivals and music.

Ski resorts, national parks, onsen (hot springs), cultural festivals and art – Niigata prefecture ticks just about every travel box. Some 335 kilometres northwest of Tokyo, overlooking the Sea of Japan, the region is blessed with wide-open spaces. In fact, more than 25 per cent of the prefecture is dedicated to nature, from leafy parks and gardens to lakes and waterfalls.

JOETSU
This city is home to one of the world's most spectacular floral displays. Every April, Takada Park is transformed with a mass of beautiful pink blooms, its 4,000-plus cherry trees glowing around the clock thanks to the addition of some 3,000 lanterns. Grab a snap with the park's turreted castle in the background.

SADO ISLAND
Just offshore from the mainland in the Sea of Japan, Sado Island was once a refuge for political exiles. Today, it has a thriving cultural scene, including hosting the annual Earth Celebration music festival.

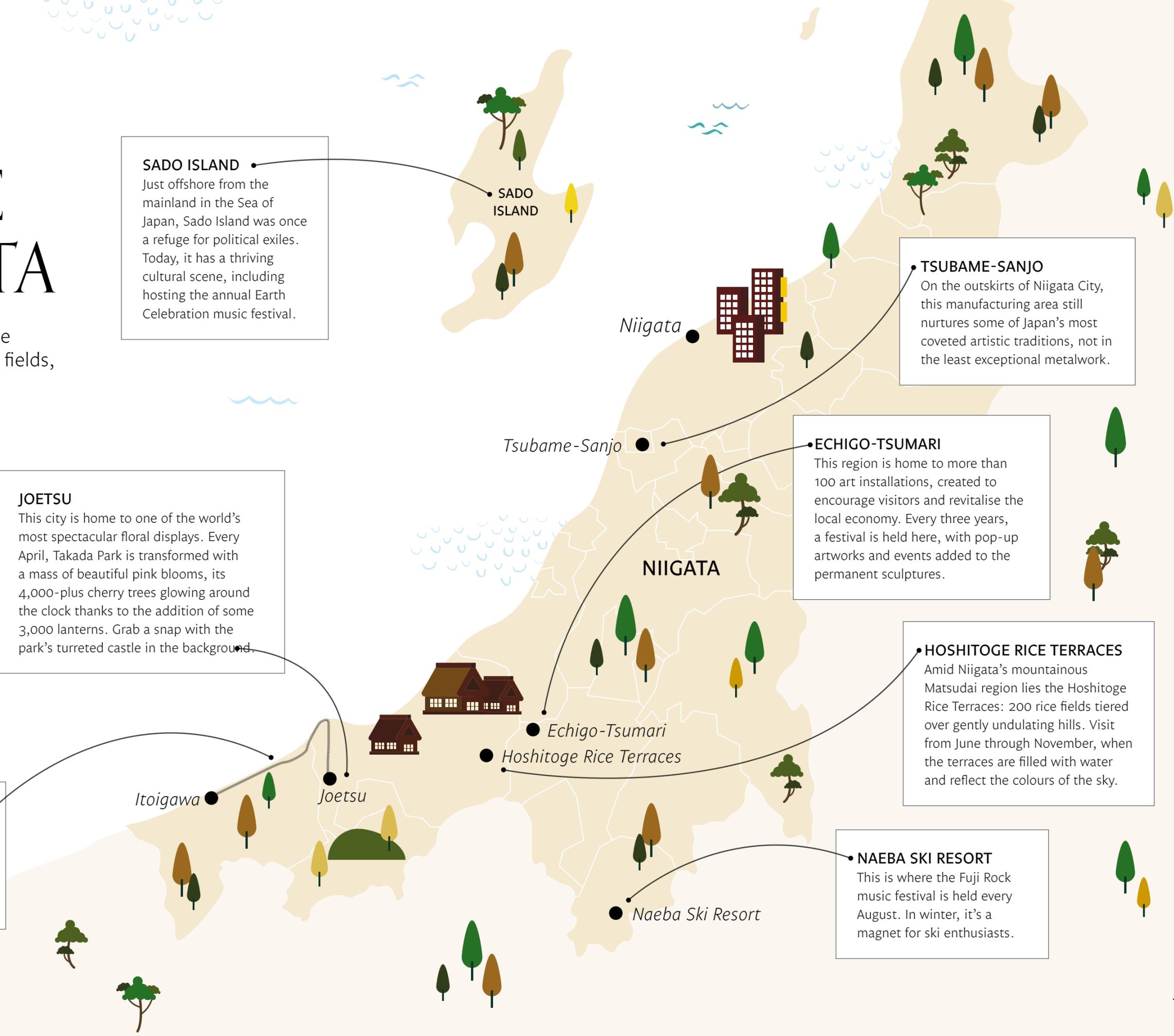
TSUBAME-SANJO
On the outskirts of Niigata City, this manufacturing area still nurtures some of Japan's most coveted artistic traditions, not in the least exceptional metalwork.

ECHIGO-TSUMARI
This region is home to more than 100 art installations, created to encourage visitors and revitalise the local economy. Every three years, a festival is held here, with pop-up artworks and events added to the permanent sculptures.

HOSHITOGI RICE TERRACES
Amid Niigata's mountainous Matsudai region lies the Hoshitoge Rice Terraces: 200 rice fields tiered over gently undulating hills. Visit from June through November, when the terraces are filled with water and reflect the colours of the sky.

NAEBA SKI RESORT
This is where the Fuji Rock music festival is held every August. In winter, it's a magnet for ski enthusiasts.

JOETSU-MYOKO TO ITOIGAWA
This is the scenic route Niigata's *Setsugekka* train travels, offering a glimpse into this beautiful prefecture, with fine food and sake served up along the way.





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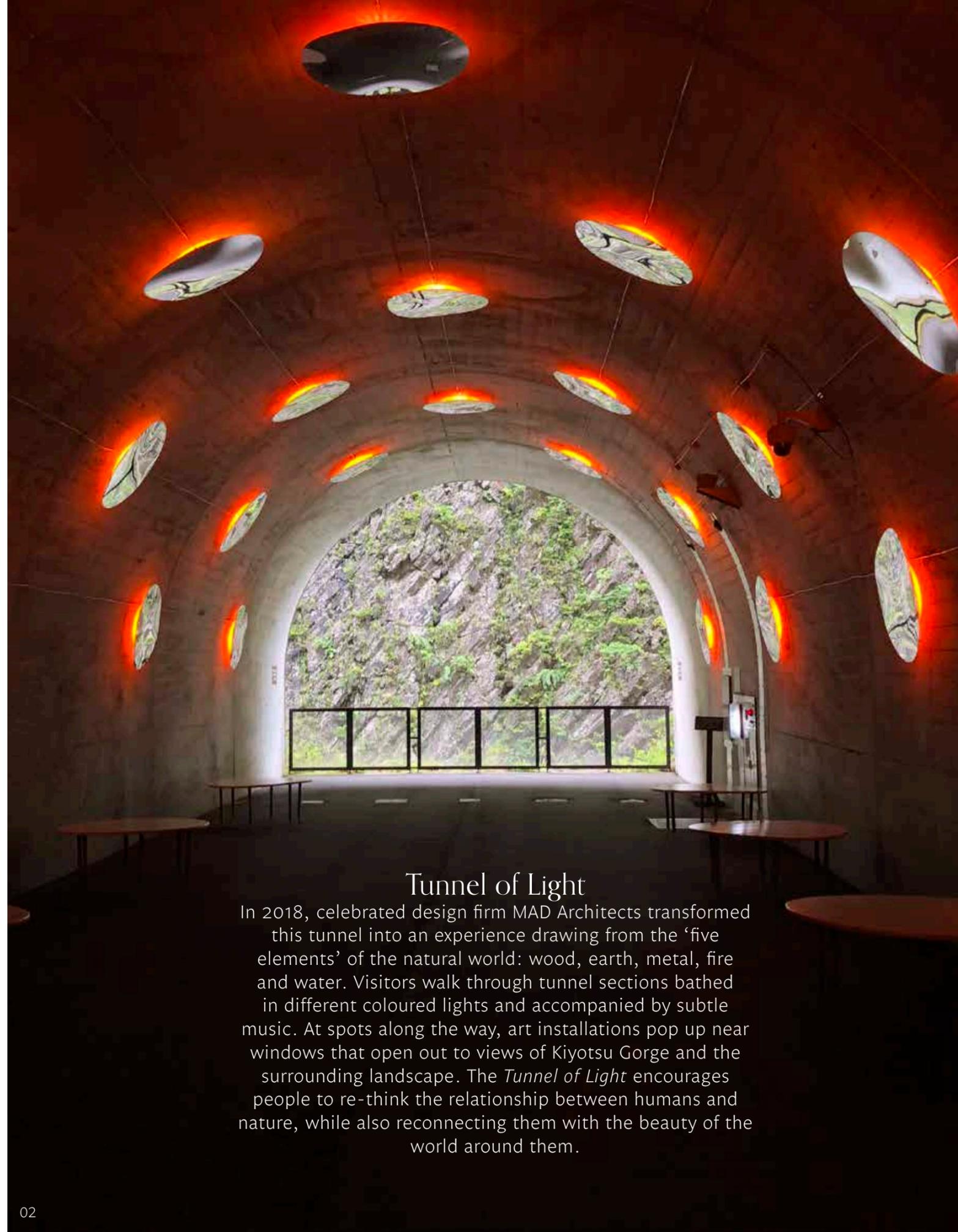
FIELDS OF *Dreams*

Faced with a declining population as people moved to the city, the Echigo-Tsumari region turned to an age-old tool to draw crowds.

The Echigo-Tsumari region takes up the southern part of Niigata prefecture. It's an area renowned for its hillside rice fields and wintry blankets of snow, and those who choose to live here adhere to a very traditional lifestyle. Every three years, though, this sleepy area comes alive, playing host to the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale.

This art festival is one of the

world's largest, in terms of sheer area covered, and has pioneered the regional art festival concept within Japan. It aims to explore the *satoyama* landscape – the borderline between the mountains and the plains. Art installations range from the bizarre to the mundane, but all of them draw on the rich heritage of this corner of Japan. And many are permanent – read on for some highlights.

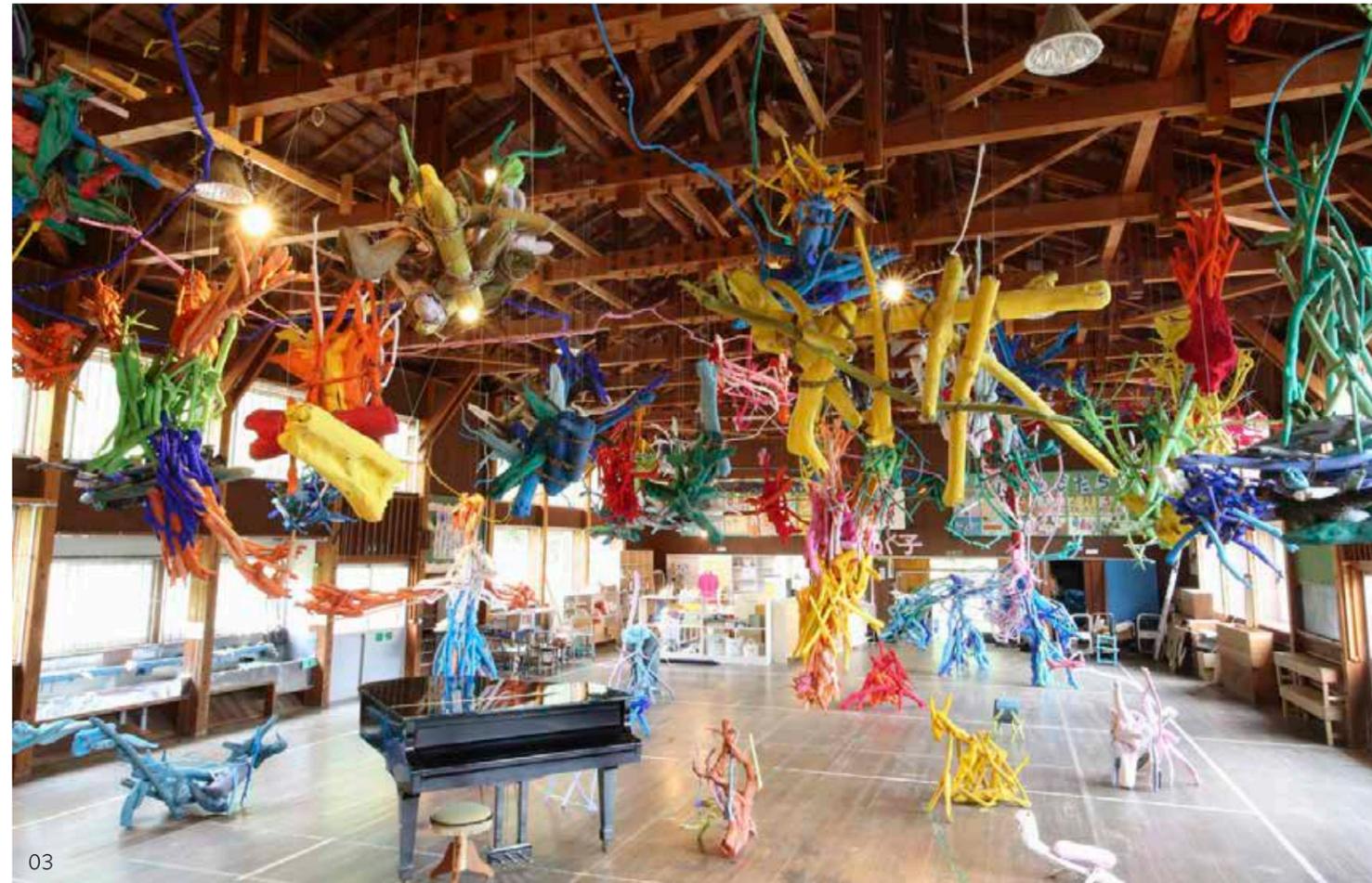


Tunnel of Light

In 2018, celebrated design firm MAD Architects transformed this tunnel into an experience drawing from the 'five elements' of the natural world: wood, earth, metal, fire and water. Visitors walk through tunnel sections bathed in different coloured lights and accompanied by subtle music. At spots along the way, art installations pop up near windows that open out to views of Kiyotsu Gorge and the surrounding landscape. The *Tunnel of Light* encourages people to re-think the relationship between humans and nature, while also reconnecting them with the beauty of the world around them.

Reverse City

This is a work that tends toward the absurd, inspiring awe and unease at the same time. It features rows of gigantic coloured pencils hanging from thick beams, each writing tool marked with the name of a country. This city of pencils hovers at about two metres over the ground, detached from nature. The points of the pencils face towards the ground, dangling above the viewer. Look up if you dare!



For Lots of Lost Windows

In the wake of the Chutetsu Earthquake, which struck Niigata in 2004, artist Akiko Utsumi attempted to turn the shared landscape of Echigo-Tsumari into a more personal, solitary experience. The result was this exhibit: a large window – complete with curtains fluttering in the breeze – frames the surrounding landscapes, giving visitors a new angle to appreciate the view. Utsumi wanted to create a canvas for the beautiful nature all around her, transforming it into something more intimate to the viewer, without disrupting the environment.

Hachi & Seizo Tashima Museum of Picture Book Art

An abandoned school becomes a rich new world at the Hachi & Seizo Tashima Museum of Picture Book Art. Artist Seizo Tashima has created surreal and interactive displays in the empty classrooms of Sanada Primary School, every installation constructed from Japanese natural materials, including slabs of driftwood and nuts. Many parts of the museum move, powered by water gathered from a locust-shaped bamboo fountain out the front.



01 Bloom © Patrick St Michel 02 Tunnel of Light © Patrick St Michel 03, 04 Installations in the Hachi & Seizo Tashima Museum of Picture Book Art © Ishizuka Gentaro 05 Reverse City © Patrick St Michael 06 For Lots of Lost Windows © Patrick St Michael 07 Hoshitoge Rice Terrace © Ryosele/Shutterstock



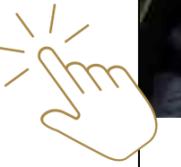
Hoshitoge Rice Terrace

It's thanks to these rice fields, nestled between mountains, that the area was named one of the 100 most beautiful villages in Japan. It's memorable all year round, but especially photogenic between June and November when the fields fill with water and the sky above reflects off mirror-like surfaces. It's also a showstopping space to watch the sun rise, even if you have to set your alarm to see it in all its glory. Think of this as nature's artwork. ◆





Click here to discover the best places to watch noh across Sado.



SADO FOR

Japan's sixth-largest island lies just off the Niigata coast. From UNESCO-listed theatrical performances to eye-catching tub boats, here are eight reasons why you should add Sado to your next itinerary.

ALL SEASONS

The z-shaped island of Sado was once the final destination of exiled court nobles and intellectuals who lost in politics. But in the 12th century, the Japanese discovered gold here, and suddenly this sleepy island was changed forever. Alongside the golden boom, rice terraces and agriculture flourished; these days, Sado is also known for some of the best produce in the country.

Time for theatre
While *noh* – a form of classical dance-drama – has been performed across Japan since the 1300s, it's particularly revered on Sado, where playwright Zeami was exiled, and subsequently brought the art to life. The performances were originally used to celebrate the gods, later becoming a form of entertainment for the elite. At the peak of its popularity, Sado had 200 *noh* stages; 30 remain today, representing a third of all Japan's *noh* stages.



02



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“The shallow-barrel ‘tub boats’ were designed as transportation for locals collecting seaweed and shellfish”

Stroll Shukunegi

Shukunegi Village is a pretty historic pocket of Sado island, which, to this day, remains relatively untouched by modern development. Featuring snaking narrow alleys, small canals and gracefully ageing double-storey wooden houses, it's like a living snapshot of a bygone era.

Golden tour

Sado Kinzan was once the most productive gold mine in Japan, and a lucrative income source for the Tokugawa Shogunate. Travellers can learn about gold production as they wander the site's winding passageways, dotted with informative displays and life-like miner robots.



03

Float your boat

The *tarai* boat, also colloquially known as 'tub boat,' tour offered by Yajima Taiken Koryukan centre is one of Japan's most unique sailing experiences. These small, but sturdy, shallow-barrel boats were designed in the mid-late 1800s, initially to be used as transportation for locals collecting seaweed and shellfish, and fishing on the calm waters of Sado.

01 A *noh* theatre performance 02 Wandering the alleys of Shukunegi Village 03 Exploring Sado Kinzan, a former gold mine 04 A 'tub boat'
© Shutterstock

“Noh performances were originally used to celebrate the gods, later becoming a form of entertainment for the elite. At its peak of popularity, Sado had more than 200 noh stages”



05

Secret grotto

To see Sado from a new perspective, hop on a boat and take a cruise to the island’s mesmerising deep-blue Ryuodo Caves, also known as Sado’s ‘Blue Grotto’. There are 11 ‘sea caves’ on the Ogi Peninsula, but this is one of the biggest and most impressive systems.

Beat your drum

The Sado Island Taiko Centre (also known as Tatakokan) is the headquarters of Kodo, Japan, and potentially the world’s most famous *taiko* drumming collective. Visitors here can get involved by taking lessons taught by members.

Night view

Once a massive industrial powerhouse, the Kitazawa Flotation plant was abandoned and left to be reclaimed by nature in the 1950s. It’s now a National Historic site and home to an impressive nighttime LED light display that is not to be missed.

Sample sake

Niigata is known for its high-quality rice; as a result, it’s an excellent destination for sampling some of the nation’s finest *sake*. Hokusetsu Shuzo Sake Brewery, established in 1872, supplies *sake* to sushi chain Nobu in New York, Los Angeles, London, Milan and Dubai. ◆

From Niigata Train Station, it’s a short bus or taxi ride to Niigata Port. There are six daily ferries from here to Sado, with the journey taking about 2.5 hours; there’s also a fast-speed jetfoil that will zip you to the island in just 65 minutes.

06



05 The welcoming waters of the Blue Grotto 06, 07 Taiko drumming
© Lucy Dayman 08 Hokusetsu Sake Brewery on Sado Island



07



08

TREASURED *Traditions*

Tsubame Sanjo, Niigata's metalworking district, is a must-visit for anyone interested in Japanese crafts.

In the Edo period, Tsubame Sanjo was renowned across Japan for manufacturing high-quality nails. Local craftsmen still use these ancient methods to make knives, tableware and even iPod finishes today. The quality of the workmanship is so high that cutlery produced in Tsubame Sanjo is selected each year as the official cutlery for the Nobel Prize Ceremony.

Start your visit to Tsubame Sanjo at the **Regional Products Promotion Center**, which features products from across the region, from knives to cups to eating utensils. Make sure to try out the knife-sharpening experience.

At the **Tojiro** factory, visitors can observe the craftsmanship that goes into their famous stainless-steel creations – head to the Knife Gallery to discover the plethora of knives the company produces. If you book a cooking class at the kitchen studio

here, you'll learn the optimal ways to use knives when preparing a meal.

Suwada Blacksmith Works, Inc. has been creating superior cutting tools using the area's famed metalworking techniques since 1926. They craft everything from nail clippers to gardening instruments and cutlery. But they specialise in the *kuikiri* blade, in which both sides of the blade are perfectly aligned to cut an object. Visitors can see the entire process – from creation to quality check – at Suwada's Open Factory.

For something a little different, make sure you stop by **Gyokusendo**. Founded in 1816, the company and its artisans follow the same techniques used over the last two centuries. They strike copper plates with metal hammers, spending hours making sure the object they are working on takes on the proper shape and has the appropriate feel. Visitors to their shop can see this meticulous process up close. ◆



01

“The quality of the workmanship is so high that cutlery produced in Tsubame Sanjo is officially used at Nobel Prize ceremonies.”



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On the right track

Running through the picturesque landscape of coastal Niigata, from the rugged mountains to the sweeping sea, the *Setsugekka* train takes sightseeing to a whole new level.

Stunning views

This crimson sightseeing train has the largest panoramic windows in Japan, offering an incredible view of the Niigata countryside.

Welcome drink

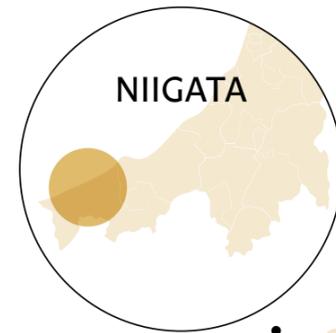
Guests are served a welcome drink in their seat. The sparkling wine is produced especially for *Setsugekka* by Fermier, a winery in Niigata.

Japanese Sea

The train runs along the Japanese Sea. On the afternoon ride, guests can admire magnificent sunsets. Expect dramatic waves in winter.

Myokosan

Soak up views of Myokosan (Mt Myoko). One of the most prominent peaks in Niigata, it rises 2,454 metres above sea level.



Lunch

The train dishes up a multi-course lunch – both French and Japanese depending on the time of day – crafted by chefs who use the area’s best local produce to deliver an *ekiben* (train lunch box) you’ll never forget.

Carriage 1

Setsugekka has two carriages. In car 1, the seats run along a counter facing the windows. All passengers are welcome to use the High Deck at the front of the car to soak up the view.

Carriage 2

Expect luxurious, forward-facing seats with elegant wooden tables in carriage 2.

The bar

Sakura Lounge in carriage 2 is open to all guests and serves *sake* from 20 different Japanese breweries along the train line, as well as locally-produced wines.

Nihongi station

This is listed as a cultural asset by the Japanese government. The wooden station building and brick lamp shed were constructed in 1910.

Myoko Kogen

The souvenir shop here is the place to buy Niigata-made products. Try the *kanzuri* seasoning, a fermented product made from exposing red pepper to snow and adding citrus fruit and salt.

Itoigawa Station

This is the last stop. The staff will hand out *castella*, a sponge cake with rice, as a gift.



01 The eye-catching *Setsugekka* 02 Inside the bar carriage 03 Traditional Japanese and western meals are served on board the train





MARK YOUR Calendars!

Whether rock or percussion, music steals the scene across Niigata. Add these two cultural celebrations to your calendar.

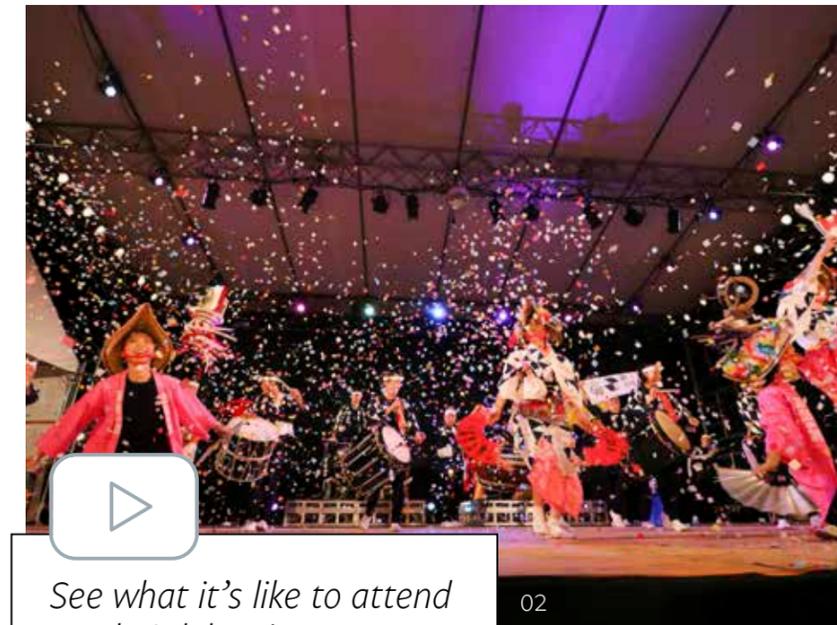
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Earth Celebration Sado Island

Held every August since 1988, this is quite possibly the world's most epic drumming festival. The internationally acclaimed Kodo *taiko* (percussion) group are your hosts, and they facilitate dozens of concerts, cultural workshops and island tours – not to mention all manner of fringe musical and theatrical events, often showcasing international performers.

Days end with an outdoor drumming extravaganza, culminating on the final night with a show that dazzles with feats of strength and synchronised beats. Onlookers are encouraged to get involved, whether dancing or beating their own drums.

Widely regarded as the best drumming troupe in the world, Kodo has called Sado Island home since 1982, their presence here going a long way to revitalising the island's cultural scene. ◆



See what it's like to attend Earth Celebration.

02

“During the celebration, Sado's harbourside market is the place to visit for local cuisine, arts and crafts, and festival clothing”

01 Making some noise © Earth Celebration 02 Kodo musicians © Earth Celebration 03 Fuji Rock has a dreamy setting at Naeba Ski Resort © Fuji Rock

Fuji Rock Festival Naeba Ski Resort

The largest outdoor music festival in Japan, Fuji Rock sees more than 200 local and international artists take to stages to entertain crowds – for three days on end. For more than two decades, the setting for this musical celebration has been Naeba Ski Resort, on the eastern slope of Niigata's Mount Takenoko. It attracts some of the world's top creative talents, with past performers including FKA Twigs, The Strokes,

Beck, Foo Fighters, Muse and Tame Impala, among many others.

In addition to the allure of seeing the world's top musicians in action, Fuji Rock draws crowds for its dreamy setting, including natural mineral hot springs (*onsen*). Be sure to take a soak at on-site Naeba Onsen.

Click here to learn more about Fuji Rock.



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Fest food

There are more than 100 food and drink stalls around the festival grounds (and outside), which means you can sip *sake* or Japanese craft beer, slurp up ramen and nibble on sushi.



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