

# Fukuoka

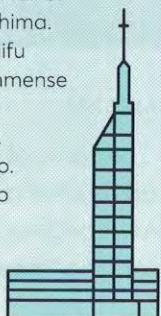
—The seventh largest city in Japan has a reputation for its colourful nightlife. But as Helen Foster discovers, beyond the bright lights lie ancient castles, magnificent shrines and islands bursting with flowers (and cats)—

## MYTH #1



### > You can see it all in a day

It's possible to tick off must-sees such as the main temples, the 234m-high Fukuoka Tower ([fukuokatower.co.jp](http://fukuokatower.co.jp)), nearby Seaside Momochi – a 1km stretch of sand with 1960s surf shack beach bar – and Canal City mall with its winding waterways, in a day. But you won't get to Nokonoshima, the nearby island full of flowers ([nokonoshima.com/en](http://nokonoshima.com/en)), or Dazaifu Tenmangu, an immense Shinto shrine in Fukuoka, Kyushu. And you'll want to. Allow at least two to three days to do Fukuoka well.



## MYTH #2



### It's pronounced Fuk – u – oka

> Stop giggling at the back, the correct pronunciation of this city's name is foo-quo-ca. Fukuoka is also the name of the area (prefecture) where the city is located. Oddly, neither place is home to Fukuoka station – that's about 900km away on the main Japanese island of Honshu. If you're travelling to Fukuoka by bullet train, book your ticket to Hakata station (pronounced just as you think it would be).

## MYTH #3



### It's not as cool or quirky as Tokyo

> You want quirky? Fukuoka has it. Head to Canal City and use your phone to save the city from Godzilla in their light show ([canalcity.co.jp/english](http://canalcity.co.jp/english)). Or take a trip to Sanatorium, a café run by artist Takamasa Sumi, where drinks are served in medical beakers. You want cool? Head to the district of Daimyo where tiny stairwells lead to vintage clothing stores.



## MYTH #4

**Fukuoka has a castle**

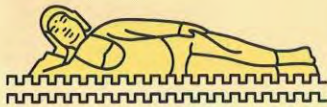
> Technically it has the ruins of one. Located in Maizuru Park, Fukuoka Castle was once the largest castle in Kyushu but was torn down during the Meiji Restoration period that started in 1868. Only some walls and a few of the previous 47 turrets remain. It is accessible by train (from Tenjin Station), subway (Ohorikoen on the Kuko Line), or bus followed by a short walk.

To visit a better-preserved monument, hop 16 minutes on the bullet train to Kokura. The five-storey Kokura Castle, built in 1602, has just re-opened after extensive renovation.

## MYTH #5

**The 'Big Buddha' temple is closed to visitors**

> Hidden on a hillside about a 30-minute train ride from Hakata station is Nanzoin Temple and a reclining Buddha that will astonish you. At 41 metres long and 11 metres high, it is the largest bronze statue in the world and weighs 300 tonnes – as much as a jumbo jet. The temple recently made headlines when its priest banned groups of foreign tourists. The key word though is *groups* – independent travellers in respectable clothing are still welcome.



"HEAD TO KUSHIDA SHRINE TO SIP FROM AN ANTI-AGEING WELL."

## MYTH #6

**It's only worth going in July**

> Fukuoka's biggest festival, Hakata Gion Yamakasa, where seven one-tonne floats race around the streets drawing hundreds of spectators, is in early July but there's more on all-year round. The end of April is peak blooming time for one of Japan's most stunning wisteria displays at Kawachi Wisteria Garden ([kawachi-fujien.com](http://kawachi-fujien.com)).

Fukuoka is also one of the warmer places in Japan, perfect for a snow-free winter break.



## MYTH #7

**The nightlife is seedy**

> Oyafuko-dori, the main bar street in the Tenjin area, is nicknamed the 'Street of Disrespectful Children'. Nakasu, the other nightlife area, is teeming with hostess bars.

However, much of the nefarious reputation of the area is fading. It is perfectly safe to walk around, with pretty izakaya tucked away in between the neon signs. And Nakasu is full of yatai – tiny outdoor food stalls where you can grab a drink and house specialities such as ramen.



## AND 3 TRUTHS

**It's a foodie paradise**

> Start with the 1100 yen sashimi breakfast at Hakata Uogashi next to Nagahama Fish Market; lunch on a steaming bowl of Tonkotsu ramen or a fiery Guru Guru Chicken kebab in Daimyo. In the evening, splash out at La Maison de la Nature Goh ([gohfukuoka.com](http://gohfukuoka.com)) – number 48 on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list (hurry, it's closing in 2020).

**It's full of beautiful shrines and temples**

> Nanzoin is just one of Fukuoka's outstanding temples; also explore Tochoji with its five-storey scarlet pagoda and the largest seated Buddha statue in Japan and head to Kushida shrine to sip from an anti-ageing well.

**It has an island full of cats**

> Just off the coast of Fukuoka, some 150 feral felines call the island of Ainoshima home. Brought by fisherman to stop mice and rats gnawing through their nets, the cats lounge in the sun, chase butterflies and purr for pictures. Catch the ferry there from Shingu Port.