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Iwakuni: Truly Unique

Glistening water trickles down a small stream overhung with bamboo and lined with drooping grass. A lady clatters by on a rickety bicycle, squealing the brakes with one hand while she presses a cell phone to her ear with the other as she chatters continuously in Japanese. She slowly winds down the road toward a cluster of tile-roofed houses nestled in the bottom of the valley. Iwakuni, Japan, is different in almost every way possible from what Americans are familiar with—wide streets, spacious yards, pick-up trucks, etc. But the city's uniqueness is what makes it a fascinating place to visit.

Iwakuni rests on the southern tip of the main island of Japan, just below Hiroshima. To the east is the glimmering Inland Sea, spotted along its horizon with tiny islands. On the west rise green-carpeted mountains. Stretched along the coast, Iwakuni has quick access to forest, lakes, rivers, and beaches.

Iwakuni, while being a fairly large city, still maintains many features of a quaint village. Along the outskirts, rice fields and acreage of lotus plants blanket the valleys. Individual families living in the city own most of the farms. Deeper within the city, the small houses with their tiny yards are squeezed tightly together, split only by narrow streets that wind between them. Carefully pruned bushes wall in the yards, and vines stretch over the gates. Cars, vans, and trucks, shrunk to a miniature scale, weave their way along the streets like ants.

In downtown Iwakuni the streets are wider and are lined with businesses, parking

garages, movie theaters, and department stores. Even familiar places such as McDonald's and 7-Eleven are featured. Crowds of Japanese, sprinkled with an occasional American, wander the covered sidewalks. Buses and taxis continually stream by, dropping people off, and trains arrive periodically to dump floods of people out of the station doors. Food stands selling fried fish, Coca-Cola, and Ritz crackers pepper any open area. Tucked between the stores are restaurants selling a variety of pork, steak, and fish which is often served raw. Theaters downtown show a schedule of movies consisting mostly of American films. Some sections of the streets are covered to create a sort of mall. Clothing, electronic, and music stores spill out onto the street, ready to sell their goods to anyone who passes by.

There are enough scenic locations around Iwakuni to satisfy the most demanding tourist. A few miles north is Myajima Island. The island juts abruptly out of the ocean, reaching an altitude of several thousand feet. Featuring an old traditional village complete with Torii gate, Myajima is definitely an all-day event. To the west of Iwakuni lies the Kintai Bridge. Made in the nineteenth century, the multi-arched bridge is truly a study in culture and architecture. A steady stream of people in bright traditional clothing drifts across the weather-worn planks of the bridge that spans the rushing water. High on the tip of a mountain nearby, an oriental castle sits overlooking the valley. A cable car glides slowly up the face of the mountain, carrying a flock of camera-toting tourists toward the castle.

Iwakuni is both rich in history, having existed for hundreds of years, and rich in technology, being part of one of the most modern countries in the world. With its marvelous natural beauty and fascinating architecture, quaint shops, and huge department stores, Iwakuni is an incredible place to visit—truly unique.