

# A Trip to the Naruto Whirlpools

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We took a cruise on Japan's Awaji Island to see an amazing natural phenomenon.

Many people are familiar with the four major Japanese islands: Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. Those with family in the US military may also know about the beautiful island of Okinawa. But did you know Japan is [actually home to almost 7,000 islands](#), more than 400 of which have people living on them? One of these is Awaji Island, home of the Naruto Whirlpools.

Awaji Island is just off the coast of the Kobe area, southwest of Osaka. It lies between Honshu, the largest Japanese island (home to Tokyo, Kyoto, and other major cities) and Shikoku.

Awajishima (the Japanese name for the island) is separated from Shikoku by a small straight that is in between the Seto Inland Sea and the Pacific Ocean.



Because of how narrow this straight is, water from the tides moves at an incredible speed (up to 20 km/hr). These currents are the fourth fastest in the world, and the fastest in Asia. As the strong current flows into the Naruto Strait, it creates a rotating force at the boundary with a gentle current near the coast. This creates whirlpools, that are swirling masses of water that can grow to incredible sizes.

We got the chance to take a cruise to see these whirlpools, a unique natural occurrence that is a one-of-a-kind experience many tourists miss out on.



## The Uzushio Cruise experience

[The Uzushio Cruise](#) leaves from a port in Fukura, on the southern end of Awaji Island. There are several cruises per day, and each one takes about an hour.

The time of day you will be able to see the whirlpools may differ depending on the day. They are a natural phenomenon that can easily be affected by the wind or waves, therefore the size of each can be unpredictable.

The route the boat takes at the Naruto Strait also depends on the time of day and the activity of the waves.



We arrived early and took some time to check out the port building, which includes some restaurants and nice restroom facilities. There is also a convenience store nearby where you can buy snacks if you desire. The cruise counter is straight ahead when you walk in the doors of the harbor building, so there's no mistaking it. You can buy tickets at the counter or online prior to your visit.



The tickets had clear, colorful images of the whirlpools and the ship, making them great to keep as souvenirs. Even though we took the trip in January, there was a decent-sized crowd willing to brave the winter cold coming off the water. The staff also handed out small disposable heat

packs to add some comfort. Even though it was a nice, sunny day, and we were plenty warm standing outside while waiting to board, once out on the water, it was fairly cold, so be sure to layer up when taking the cruise in the winter.



## The voyage out

The company has three ships, which are used at different times and seasons. Despite being modern engine-driven craft, they're designed to look like old-timey sailboats with big masts, making them much more photogenic. The boarding process was fast, and we had no trouble finding seats on a bench that faced outward on the starboard side of the boat.



The boat got in motion, and the staff on the dock waved to us as we started our journey. While we pulled out of the port, big water cannons gave us a lively sendoff. The ride was incredibly smooth, not bumpy at all during the 20-minute trip to the bridge and its whirlpools.



As we continued through the cove, a guide got on the microphone and discussed Awaji Island and the sights of the surrounding area. The guidance was only in Japanese, but they are planning on setting up an English guiding service in the future.

Among the sights you can witness on this part of the journey are the Fukura fishing village, several resorts and camping spots, and two small islands in the middle of the cove. There is also a big wind turbine that powers the Plaza Awajishima hotel, and Wakodo no Hiroba Koen, a memorial tower dedicated to students who died during World War II. Once we left the cove, the water opened up, big and blue on this nice sunny day. As we approached Onaruto Bridge, we could see the thrashing waves and the movement of the Naruto Whirlpools.





## The whirlpools

The pictures I'd seen didn't really do these whirlpools justice. I was thinking of tiny swirls of water, but they are HUGE. The ones close to our boat were minor, but we saw one a short distance away that was absolutely massive, a giant spiral of water that could have swallowed an elephant. There's definitely an element of danger to this area, though we were perfectly safe on the ship.



Beneath the bridge, the whirlpools are less defined, and the gnashing currents ferociously battle in an elegant chaos of white-capped waves. Even in our big boat, we could feel the currents battling beneath us. These whirlpools are nothing to play with.



The boat navigated around and gave us a solid 20 minutes of photo time with the awe-inspiring currents. To say this is something you won't see anywhere else doesn't really cut it. As mentioned, these are some of the fastest currents on Earth, and the whirlpools inspire a beautiful quieting reverence for how nature can create order from pandemonium. We were lucky to get to experience it.



On the way back, the guide hopped on the microphone again to provide more information about Awaji Island. This area is famous for its Awaji onions, and she offered a lot of advice on how to best experience this local delicacy. We were back within the hour, as promised, and exited the ship so another group could get on. The trip wasn't too short or too long, it was a perfect amount of time to see and experience the whirlpools.

After the cruise



## MARINE souvenir shop

After sprinting back inside to bask in the warmth, we checked out MARINE, a gift shop located in the same building as the ticket office. They sell a lot of high-end items like sweets made from sweet potatoes, seafood snacks, sake and other alcoholic drinks, glasswork, toys and small gifts, and plenty of onion-flavored products. This is more of a spot to get something nice to bring back home for a family member or a memento of the day's journey as opposed to a place to get food to eat then and there. If you're hungry, head past the foot baths and across the street to the local market.



## Fukura Marche

Just a two-minute walk from the port, you'll find Fukura Marche, which features a small shop as well as a seating area where you can eat lunch or snacks. This shop offers an even wider selection of treats, drinks, fancy local products like craft cola and marmalade, vegetables, fresh sashimi, and (of course) Awaji onions.



Down the block, there's also a café, an ice cream shop, and a fried food stand where you can get a fried fish cake. Before we get to that, let's cover the food of Awaji Island and what makes it famous.



## Awaji Island cuisine – don't forget to try the onions!

As mentioned, the most famous thing about Awaji Island is its onions. These are different from most onions you've had because they are sweet. A fact about me: I DESPISE onions. Never liked 'em, never will. And yet, when I tried these sweet local delicacies, I thought they were delicious. This is definitely something to seek out on a trip to Japan, a food you may not have heard of but will brag to all your friends about when you get home.





At the fried food stand, we tried a fried Awaji onion and snapper croquette. These patties, or “croquettes,” are a very popular part of Japanese cuisine. You can often find them filled with minced beef, vegetables, or seafood. This one had fish mixed with Awaji onion to give it extra flavor. It was nice and crispy, perfect for a cold day.



We also tried Tiger Fugu Ponzu Nuggets, which resembled small chicken nuggets. Fugu is the name for the Japanese pufferfish, [famous because it is largely poisonous](#), which is why only chefs who have been specially trained can prepare the meat. Normal fugu are raised for two years, but Awaji Island is home to “Three-Year Fugu,” which have a firmer texture. This was obvious from the first bite, as these were full of thick meat that went well with the ponzu sauce.

The last notable food is famous not because it’s from Awaji Island, but because it is inspired by the whirlpools. A common ingredient in ramen is kamaboko, a processed fish product that usually comes as one thin slice on top of your ramen soup. Often, it will be white, with a jagged edge and pink spirals inside. These spirals are meant to resemble the Naruto Whirlpools, hence the item’s name, narutomaki.



## Other attractions on Awaji Island

We live in Kobe, not far from Awaji Island, so we went home after our cruise. But if you've come all this way, consider sticking around to see some of the island's many other attractions. It's a big place that's home to farmland villages, camping resorts, and some fun places for families.

### **Zipline into Godzilla's mouth**

On the other side of Awajishima is [Nijigen no Mori](#), home to several attractions based on popular Japanese media like Dragon Quest and Naruto. There's also a big open green space to relax in on a nice day and eateries where you can have lunch or sweets. We went there to see their Godzilla attraction, which includes a short movie, shooting range, Godzilla history museum, and the chance to ride a zipline that goes straight into Godzilla's mouth. We had a lot of fun here and highly recommend it!

### **Fun with animals**

Awaji Island is also home to [Awajishima Ranch](#), where kids can interact with Japanese cows and other small animals. It's possible to milk cows, pet calves, and engage in milk tasting. Small children love getting to be this close to animals. There are several [tourist farms](#) on the island that are worth checking out. And if you're looking for something you can't find at home, there's the [Janohire Dolphin Farm](#) which has – you guessed it – dolphins up close and personal.

There are also attractions for [flower lovers](#) and those who want to [try a Japanese onsen](#). There's plenty to do on Awajishima if you're willing to venture away from the city for a while and see the Japan that a lot of tourists miss out on.



## How to get there

Thanks to its bridges, it's possible to drive to Awaji Island and the Uzushio Cruise from just about anywhere in Japan. But if you're without a car on your trip, there are other ways of getting there.

## By train/bus

Coming from Osaka, you can get on the JR Line going west from Osaka station and get off at Maiko. From there, you'll have to follow the signs to catch the bus to Fukura. This bus takes you across the Akashi-Kaikyo Bridge and through the rural parts of the island to drop you off right in front of the cruise harbor. The bus picks up from the same spot to take you back so you can get your return train. You can put money on an IC card to pay for both trains and buses, and ask station employees for help in making sure you're in the right place.

## Cycling

We've actually gone to Awaji island by bicycle before, since the beach at Maiko is only an hour's ride from our house. However, the Akashi-Kaikyo Bridge is only for cars – there are no trains that go over it, and pedestrians aren't allowed. You'll need to take a ferry (where you can bring your bikes onboard) to get over the water. Once there, you'll find Awaji Island is home to [well-regarded cycling courses](#). If you want to spend a couple days, you can bike all around the island and see every one of the attractions we mentioned.



## Conclusion

Hopefully it will be obvious from this article that we absolutely recommend Awaji Island and the Uzushio Whirlpool Cruise. We've lived only an hour or two from this attraction for years and didn't know it was there, and we're extremely glad we got the opportunity to see it. Whether you're a nature buff or tourist eager to see more of Japan than its urban areas, the Uzushio Cruise is a gem you'll be telling all your friends back home about.