

Tourism Providing Experience of Awa Culture



Photo: East Tokushima Tourism Authority

Yoshino River, nicknamed *Shikoku Saburo*. Given the area's abundance of rivers, using water taxis as a mode of transportation between tourist spots lets visitors experience the city's aquatic ambiance.

Once known as Awa Province (Awa-no-kuni), Tokushima Prefecture is renowned as the venue for the Awa Odori (Awa Dance)¹. It is also famous for its high-quality indigo dye called Awa Indigo² and the Awa Ningyo (Puppet) Joruri³, designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Japan. These are collectively referred to as the Three Great Awa Cultures. We spoke with the person in charge of promoting cultural tourism at the Tokushima Prefectural Government Office about tourism experiences centered on these special cultural aspects of the region. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

In Tokushima Prefecture, the Yoshino River, often referred to as the “raging river,” stretches from east to west. During the typhoon season, this river frequently floods, causing extensive damage. Due to that factor, it was difficult to utilize the water of the Yoshino River as a resource, and rice cultivation was difficult in parts of the river basin. So instead, indigo plant's cultivation, which is a primary source for dyes, thrived. And that is the historical background to why indigo cultivation became popular here. When the fermented indigo dye, known as *sukumo*, was harvested and introduced to the market, its superior quality gained it widespread recognition throughout the country. By the 1800s, its sales generated significant profits, prompting a surge in indigo cultivation. As a result, the *sukumo* produced in Tokushima earned its famed title as “Awa Indigo.” Crafting *sukumo* involves an extensive period, specialized techniques, and careful management, showcasing the exceptional skill of traditional craftsmanship. A visit to the House of Indigo (Ai-no-Yakata) museum in Aizumi Town exhibits the cultivation method, history of indigo, the tools and its role in creating the iconic “Japan Blue,” one of Japan's representative colors. Additionally, visitors have the opportunity to try their hand at indigo dyeing.

Backed by the economic power brought about by this indigo, the Awa indigo merchants, who had a fondness for the performing arts, fostered the development of a puppet theater known as Awa Ningyo Joruri. The format, where a narrative is accompanied by the shamisen, a traditional Japanese musical

instrument and one puppet is manipulated by three people, is unique among puppet theaters worldwide.

Kimiko Shimizu, who is involved in cultural tourism in Tokushima Prefecture, says the following: “Nowadays, Awa Ningyo Joruri can be seen every day at the Awa Jurobe Yashiki (Puppet Theater and Museum) in Tokushima City. This facility has an open design stage, modeled after the many outdoor theaters that remain within the precincts of shrines throughout the prefecture. On the upper part of the stage, there is an LED panel displaying subtitles in both English and Japanese. So, it's not only popular among foreigners but also well-received by Japanese who are unfamiliar with traditional performing arts, making it easily understandable for them.” Inside the facility, visitors also have the opportunity to try their hand at puppetry.

Also, every August, Tokushima City comes alive with the Awa Odori, a signature traditional performance of Tokushima. This event draws in over a million visitors from all over the world.

Actually, it is also said that during modern times, indigo merchants who traveled around the country trading indigo played a role in incorporating various regional cultures into this traditional dance.

In the Awa Odori Hall located in Tokushima city, visitors can watch the dance throughout the year. “During the daytime performances, our exclusive troupe, or *Ren*⁴, takes the stage, while at night, famous troupes perform on a rotating basis. There's also a chance at the end where the audience can join in, allowing everyone to experience the authentic Awa dance,” says Shimizu.

Awa Ai



Aizumi Town Board of Education

Leaves of the indigo plant, the raw material for indigo dyeing. The leaves are harvested just before the flowers bloom, finely chopped, and dried.



Aizumi Town Board of Education

The raw material for indigo dye, *sukumo* (Awa Indigo). It is covered with a straw mat (*mushiro*) and fermented over approximately 100 days to complete.



Photo: PXTA

An example of cloth dyed with indigo.

Awa Ningyo Joruri



Photo: Tokushima Prefectural Awa Jurobe Yashiki

Left: In Awa Ningyo Joruri, distinct roles exist: the main puppeteer (*omo-zukai*) operates the puppet's head and right hand, the left puppeteer (*hidari-zukai*) is in charge of the left hand, and the foot puppeteer (*ashi-zukai*) guides the feet.

Above right: The permanent stage for Awa Ningyo Joruri, Awa Jurobe Yashiki.

Below right: With bilingual subtitles on the LED panel above the stage, both novices and English-speaking foreigners can enjoy the performance.

Awa Odori



Photo: Tokushima City

Left: A scene from the Awa Odori in August. The female dancers wear yukatas and braided hats, dancing in unison with precise choreography. This cohesive beauty is a defining characteristic.

Right: An example of the dance performed at the Awa Odori Hall.



Photo: PXTA

In Tokushima Prefecture, there are facilities themed around the three major Awa cultures: Awa Indigo, Awa Ningyo Joruri, and Awa Odori. At these venues, various experiential programs are available for visitors.

Participating in indigo dyeing, interacting with the Awa Ningyo Joruri dolls, and enjoying the Awa Odori dance - these distinct experiences are sure to leave lasting impressions from a trip to Tokushima. 📌

1. While the prototype of the dance existed 400 years ago, the name "Awa Odori" was coined and became established after the Second World War.
2. Natural dye. Tokushima Prefecture is the primary producer of this plant, which belongs to the knotweed family. Tokushima excelled in the production of fermented indigo leaves, known as *sukumo*. The dye solution is created by dissolving the condensed blue color from *sukumo* in water. Then, the material intended for dyeing is repeatedly dipped in the solution and exposed to the air to achieve the desired color.
3. This form of traditional Japanese puppetry is known as *ningyo joruri*, where narration through song, called *tayu*, is accompanied by shamisen music, and three performers manipulate each puppet. This art form gained prominence from the 17th century and is designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan.
4. *Ren* refers to the groups or teams that perform the Awa Odori dance. It's essentially the team's name.