

Discover Japan

(Without Leaving Tokyo)

A tour of the “antenna shops” that promote local specialties from all over the country is the next best thing to travel itself.

Let’s “pack our bags,” so to speak, and travel around Japan. We’ll start with a jaunt way down south for some healthy Okinawan Agu pork. Then we’ll zip back up to Hiroshima to pick up a box of lemon cake blessed with Setouchi sunshine before heading up north to Hokkaido for some fresh seafood or a new type of smoked salmon.

It may sound like a long journey, but it is possible to do in one day. Thanks to the many “antenna shops” in central Tokyo, “travelers” are able to savor some of the best specialties that local communities have to offer, without leaving the capital.

Antenna shops were first established in Tokyo in the early 1990s and their number has continued to grow, reaching a total of 54 in 2016. Often co-organized by local governments, these shops are meant to promote their products to the capital’s big consumer market. Despite the high costs of running a retail store in central Tokyo, local governments regard these shops as important public relations centers to provide the population with general information on the prefecture and its attractions as a tourist destination.

At times, quite unexpectedly, the shops have also become a focus for Tokyo residents to show their support for those affected in a distant prefecture in unfortunate times of natural disasters.

After a magnitude-7.3 earthquake struck Kumamoto Prefecture on April 14, 2016, more than 9,000 people flocked to the prefecture’s antenna shop Ginza Kumamoto-kan in the three days after the disaster. “There was a long line of shoppers in front of the store and the shelves were quickly emptied as everything we had sold out,” said Motohiro Kimura, a spokesperson for the shop. “For most people in Tokyo, Kumamoto was too far away to visit. So they came to us instead, hoping to support the disaster-hit area by purchasing our products.”

With Kumamon, the prefecture’s famous bear mascot, as the main attraction, the shop sells some 1,000 local products, including fruit, vegetables and traditional rice-based Kuma *shochu* distilled spirits. According to Kimura, sales for fiscal 2016 reached around 600 million yen (around \$5.3 million), nearly



Top: Kumamoto Prefecture’s famous mascot, Kumamon, welcomes visitors to the Ginza Kumamoto-kan. Above: Iwate Prefecture’s traditional Nambu ironware is a popular item at the Iwate Ginga Plaza.

double the previous year. Around 1,200 shoppers visit the store each day, still up 20 to 30 percent over the years prior to the disaster.

The antenna shops of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures from the Tohoku region of northern Japan received similar support following the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011.

dairy products from the renowned Koiwai Farm have always been favorites, traditional Nambu ironware is gaining popularity, especially among visitors from overseas.

Miyagi Furusato Plaza (CoCo Miyagi) sits on a busy street near Ikebukuro Station, one of the world’s busiest stations. “Commuters can drop by and pick up Miyagi products for everyday use,” said Kunitaka Okura, the shop’s deputy manager. Repeat customers are attracted by the wide range of *sasa kamaboko* (Miyagi’s popular steamed fish paste) and weekly special sales events held near the entrance. And the specialty *gyutan* (beef tongue) restaurant on the second floor is so popular that its signature *gyutan* lunch set is quickly sold out every day.

In 2014, Fukushima Prefecture opened a new antenna shop, Nihombashi Fukushima-kan (Midette), in the Nihombashi district to focus more on product sales. Unfortunately, even six years after the disasters, rumors about the impacts of the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident triggered by the tsunami continue to affect sales of products from the prefecture. “Of course, all of our agricultural products are strictly checked,” Midette Manager Takuya Nemoto said. “But there are still misunderstandings.” He believes the Fukushima antenna shop has a job to do in putting the record straight.

The shop acts as an important facility for public relations in Tokyo, providing accurate information on the prefectural efforts to secure food safety, especially for its high-quality rice and seasonal fruits. The shop also organizes events in collaboration with the prefecture’s municipalities and other organizations to promote the various communities. The shop’s nickname “Midette” comes from a word in the Fukushima dialect meaning “Come and see!”

Fukushima is also proud that its sake has won more national gold prizes than any other prefecture over the past five years, with 22 “gold” brands in 2016. The new shop is equipped with an impressive sake corner and tables where visitors can enjoy tasting a variety of local brands.

As host to all these antenna shops, Tokyo provides its enormous population with a glimpse into other locales. Enjoyable virtual trips featuring interaction with real products help connect shoppers with local producers and deepen understanding, helping to revitalize communities around Japan.

They continue to contribute to the reconstruction support efforts, while further promoting their prefecture’s specialty products to a wider market.

Located in the Ginza district, Iwate Ginga Plaza’s 750-square-meter retail space is filled with nearly 3,000 items, ranking in the top four of prefectural antenna shops. While noodles from Morioka and