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Visiting Nagoya

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Getting There: How to Reach Nagoya
- **Chapter 2** Transportation Within Nagoya
- **Chapter 3** Best Times to Visit Nagoya
- **Chapter 4** Accommodation Options in Nagoya
- **Chapter 5** Exploring Nagoya Castle
- **Chapter 6** Discovering Atsuta Shrine
- **Chapter 7** Visiting Osu Kannon Temple
- **Chapter 8** Museums of Nagoya
- **Chapter 9** Cultural Experiences in Nagoya
- **Chapter 10** Shopping in Sakae and Osu
- **Chapter 11** Enjoying Nagoya Meshi: Local Cuisine
- **Chapter 12** Recommended Restaurants
- **Chapter 13** Entertainment in Nagoya
- **Chapter 14** Day Trips to Inuyama
- **Chapter 15** Exploring Takayama from Nagoya
- **Chapter 16** A Journey to Ise
- **Chapter 17** Practical Information for Tourists
- **Chapter 18** Language Tips for Travelers
- **Chapter 19** Understanding Local Currency
- **Chapter 20** Staying Connected: Wi-Fi Access
- **Chapter 21** Ensuring Your Safety in Nagoya
- **Chapter 22** Communicating: Useful Phrases
- **Chapter 23** Sample 1-Day Itinerary
- **Chapter 24** Sample 3-Day Itinerary
- **Chapter 25** Experiencing Nagoya like a Local

Introduction

Nagoya, the heart of Japan's Chubu region, offers an intriguing blend of history, innovation, and charm that captivates every visitor. As the fourth-largest city in Japan, Nagoya boasts a dynamic atmosphere that reflects its significance in the country's economic and cultural landscape. Its strategic location, nestled between Tokyo and Osaka, makes it a convenient and compelling destination for travelers eager to experience Japan beyond the typical tourist trail.

The allure of Nagoya lies in its harmonious juxtaposition of past and present. The city's historic landmarks, such as the iconic Nagoya Castle with its golden shachihoko, or the revered Atsuta Shrine with centuries-old religious significance, invite visitors to delve into its rich traditions. Meanwhile, Nagoya's embrace of modernity is evident in its bustling shopping districts, contemporary art scenes, and state-of-the-art museums, including the renowned Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology.

For those adventuring to Nagoya, understanding the city's unique vibe is essential. There's an understated elegance to the city, characterized by the friendly locals and a pace of life that's more relaxed compared to the frenzy of Tokyo or Osaka. The urban landscape is peppered with verdant parks, tranquil temples, and a coastline, offering scenic retreats amid the urban sprawl.

Travelers looking to indulge in culinary delights will find Nagoya a haven. The city's famed local cuisine, fondly termed Nagoya Meshi, includes must-try dishes such as hitsumabushi (grilled eel), miso katsu (deep-fried cutlets with red miso sauce), and tebasaki (spicy chicken wings). Dining in Nagoya is an experience that both satisfies the palate and offers a deeper connection to the region's culture.

As we embark on a detailed exploration of Nagoya in this guide, we promise to provide you with the insights and practical tips needed for an unforgettable journey. From deciphering the best times to visit, navigating its transportation system, to uncovering the hidden gems beyond the tourist hotspots, this book serves as your comprehensive companion in discovering everything Nagoya has to offer. Whether you're here for a short visit or planning an extended stay, you're about to experience one of Japan's most vibrant cities like never before.

CHAPTER ONE: Getting There: How to Reach Nagoya

Nagoya's position in the very heart of Japan isn't just a geographical statement; it's a significant advantage for travellers. Equidistant from Tokyo and the Kansai region (home to Osaka and Kyoto), Nagoya acts as a crucial junction, making it remarkably accessible whether you're arriving directly from overseas or travelling domestically within Japan. This central location has shaped its history as a transportation hub, a role it continues to play with formidable efficiency thanks to its international airport and its prominence on the nation's high-speed rail network. Getting to Nagoya is rarely a challenge; the main decision often boils down to choosing the method that best suits your budget, starting point, and schedule.

For the vast majority of international visitors flying directly towards the Chubu region, their first encounter with the area will be Chubu Centrair International Airport, universally known by its airport code, NGO. Often referred to simply as 'Centrair,' this modern and highly regarded airport isn't technically within Nagoya city limits. Instead, it occupies a purpose-built artificial island in Ise Bay, roughly 35 kilometres south of the city centre. Don't let the offshore location deter you; its connection to the city is seamless and efficient, reflecting Japan's renowned prowess in transport infrastructure. The airport itself is frequently ranked among the best in the world for its size category, known for its cleanliness, user-friendly design, and surprisingly engaging facilities, including an observation deck popular with aviation enthusiasts and even a bathhouse offering views of the runways.

Centrair serves as a significant gateway, handling a wide array of international flights. Major airlines connect Nagoya directly with cities across Asia, including Seoul, Taipei, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore. Depending on the season and airline schedules, you may also find direct links to destinations in Europe, North America, and Oceania, although some routes might involve connections through larger hubs like Tokyo's Narita or Haneda airports, or Osaka's Kansai International Airport (KIX). Domestically, Centrair offers frequent flights connecting Nagoya to other key Japanese cities such as Sapporo in Hokkaido, Fukuoka in Kyushu, Naha in Okinawa, and, importantly, both Haneda (HND) and Narita (NRT) airports in Tokyo, providing convenient transfer options for those arriving on international flights into the capital.

Upon clearing immigration and customs at Centrair, you'll find the arrivals hall well-equipped to ease your transition into Japan. Currency exchange counters and ATMs are readily available for obtaining Japanese Yen. You'll also find counters for major mobile carriers and dedicated rental services offering pocket Wi-Fi devices or prepaid SIM cards – essential tools for navigating and staying connected during your trip. Tourist information desks, often staffed with multilingual personnel, can provide maps,

brochures, and answer initial queries about reaching your accommodation or navigating the onward transport systems. The airport layout is generally intuitive, with clear signage in English guiding you towards ground transportation options.

The most popular and arguably most efficient way to travel between Centrair (NGO) and central Nagoya is via the Meitetsu Railway. This private railway company operates dedicated airport services that connect directly to Meitetsu Nagoya Station, which is conveniently integrated within the massive Nagoya Station complex. The flagship service is the μ -SKY Limited Express (pronounced 'Myu Sky'). These sleek, blue trains offer comfortable, reserved seating and make the journey to Meitetsu Nagoya Station in a swift 28 minutes, with limited stops. Tickets carry a small surcharge for the reserved seat on top of the base fare, but the speed and comfort are often worth it, especially after a long flight.

Alternatively, Meitetsu also runs other Limited Express and Semi-Express trains on the same line. These make more stops than the μ -SKY, resulting in slightly longer journey times – typically ranging from 35 to 50 minutes depending on the specific train type. While fractionally slower, these trains are slightly cheaper as you only need to pay the base fare unless you opt for a 'First Class' car which requires an additional fee for a reserved seat. Trains run frequently throughout the day, usually every 10-15 minutes for combined services, making it a reliable option regardless of your arrival time. The Meitetsu station platform is located directly within the airport terminal building (Access Plaza), making the transfer from baggage claim straightforward.

Another viable option for reaching the city centre from Centrair is the Airport Limousine Bus service. These comfortable coaches serve various key locations within Nagoya, including the main Nagoya Station area (often dropping off near the Meitetsu Bus Center), the downtown Sakae district (convenient for many hotels), and the Fushimi area. The journey time by bus is typically longer than the train, estimated at around 50 to 85 minutes depending on the destination stop and, crucially, traffic conditions. Nagoya, like any major city, can experience road congestion, particularly during peak hours, which can significantly impact bus travel times. However, buses offer the advantage of potentially dropping you closer to your specific hotel if it's situated along one of the designated routes, potentially saving a transfer within the city. Fares are generally comparable to the Meitetsu trains, and buses depart regularly from designated stops outside the airport terminal. Schedules and specific routes can be checked at the bus ticket counters in the arrival hall.

Taxis are, of course, available at Centrair, offering a direct door-to-door service. This is undoubtedly the most convenient option if you have a lot of luggage, are travelling in a small group, or have mobility concerns. However, convenience comes at a price. The taxi fare from the airport to central Nagoya is significantly higher than the train or bus, likely running into the tens of thousands of Yen. The travel time will also be subject to traffic conditions, potentially taking an hour or more. While readily available, taxis are

generally the least economical choice for solo travellers or budget-conscious visitors heading to standard city locations. Ride-sharing services familiar in other countries operate differently or may not be as prevalent in Japan for airport transfers, with traditional taxis being the norm.

For travellers planning to explore the wider Chubu region extensively by car, rental car counters representing major Japanese and international brands are located within the airport terminal. Renting a car directly upon arrival can be practical if Nagoya is just the starting point for a broader road trip. However, if your primary focus is exploring Nagoya city itself, renting a car is often unnecessary and potentially burdensome due to challenging navigation, limited and expensive parking, and the city's excellent public transport system. Remember that driving in Japan requires a valid International Driving Permit (IDP) accompanying your home country's driving license, and traffic drives on the left.

While Centrair (NGO) handles the vast majority of air traffic, it's worth briefly mentioning Nagoya Airfield (NKM), also known as Komaki Airport. Located north of the city centre, Komaki was Nagoya's main airport before Centrair opened in 2005. Today, its role is primarily limited to domestic flights operated almost exclusively by Fuji Dream Airlines (FDA), connecting Nagoya with smaller regional cities across Japan. Unless you are specifically flying with FDA from one of these smaller destinations, it's highly unlikely you'll arrive via Komaki. Transportation from Komaki Airport to the city centre usually involves an airport bus connection to Nagoya Station or nearby subway stations, taking around 20-30 minutes.

Beyond air travel, the most common and often most convenient way to reach Nagoya from other major Japanese cities is via the iconic Shinkansen, Japan's high-speed bullet train network. Nagoya Station is a principal stop on the Tokaido Shinkansen line, the busiest and most vital rail corridor in Japan, linking Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Kyoto, and Osaka (terminating at Shin-Osaka Station). This frequent, punctual, and incredibly fast service makes travelling between these urban giants remarkably effortless. The experience of riding the Shinkansen itself – watching the landscape blur past from a comfortable seat – is often considered a quintessential part of travelling in Japan.

Nagoya Station's importance on the Tokaido Shinkansen line means it is served by all three types of trains operating on this route: the Nozomi, Hikari, and Kodama. The Nozomi is the fastest, stopping only at the most major stations. A journey from Tokyo Station to Nagoya Station on the Nozomi takes approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes. From Shin-Osaka Station, the Nozomi whisks you to Nagoya in about 50 minutes, and from Kyoto Station, it's a mere 35 minutes. These trains run with extraordinary frequency, often departing every 10-15 minutes during peak times.

The Hikari Shinkansen makes a few more stops than the Nozomi, resulting in slightly longer travel times. For example, Tokyo to Nagoya on a Hikari might take around 1

hour and 50 minutes to just over 2 hours. The Kodama is the slowest Shinkansen service, stopping at every station along the Tokaido line. A trip from Tokyo to Nagoya on the Kodama would take closer to 2 hours and 45 minutes. While slower, Kodama trains can sometimes be less crowded, particularly in non-reserved cars. The choice between Nozomi, Hikari, and Kodama often depends on your schedule, where you are boarding, and importantly, your ticket type.

A crucial point for international tourists travelling with a standard Japan Rail Pass is that the pass typically does not cover travel on the Nozomi trains (the fastest service) on the Tokaido Shinkansen line without paying a supplementary fee. Pass holders must generally use the Hikari or Kodama services. While the Hikari is only marginally slower than the Nozomi between major hubs like Tokyo, Nagoya, and Kyoto/Osaka, the difference in frequency might mean a slightly longer wait for the next suitable train. Always check the specific conditions of your Japan Rail Pass variant, as rules regarding Nozomi (and the similar Mizuho trains on the Sanyo/Kyushu Shinkansen lines) can evolve. If you are purchasing individual tickets rather than using a pass, the Nozomi offers the quickest connection.

Purchasing Shinkansen tickets is straightforward. Tickets can be bought at dedicated Shinkansen ticket counters (Midori no Madoguchi) found in major JR stations, through multilingual ticket vending machines, or increasingly, online via official JR websites or apps. You can purchase tickets for either non-reserved seats (Jiyuseki), which allow you to sit in any available seat in designated non-reserved cars, or reserved seats (Shiteiseki), which guarantee you a specific seat in a reserved car. Reservations are recommended during peak travel seasons (like Golden Week, Obon, and New Year holidays) and for longer journeys to ensure you get a seat, especially if travelling with companions or luggage. Even outside peak times, a reservation provides peace of mind. First-class 'Green Car' seats, offering more space and comfort, are also available for an additional fee.

Nagoya Station itself is more than just a train stop; it's a colossal complex, one of the largest station buildings in the world by floor area. Above the platforms rise the JR Central Towers, housing offices, a major department store (Takashimaya), and the Nagoya Marriott Associa Hotel. The station integrates the Shinkansen platforms, numerous JR conventional lines serving local and regional destinations, platforms for the private Meitetsu and Kintetsu railway lines, and multiple subway lines (Higashiyama and Sakuradori lines initially, with connections to others). Finding your way around this vast hub can be initially daunting, especially differentiating between the JR lines, Meitetsu, Kintetsu, and subway entrances. However, signage is generally good, with colour-coding and English directions. Allow ample time for transfers if connecting between different train lines or modes of transport within the station. We'll delve deeper into navigating the station and using local transport in the next chapter, but be prepared for its scale upon arrival.

While the Shinkansen is the star for long-distance rail travel, Nagoya is also well-connected by conventional JR lines and private railways, offering options for reaching the city from closer locations or for more budget-conscious travellers willing to trade speed for savings. JR local and rapid trains connect Nagoya with numerous cities and towns within Aichi Prefecture and neighbouring prefectures like Gifu, Mie, and Shizuoka. For instance, services run frequently to places like Gifu City, Toyota City (home of the automotive giant), and coastal areas in Mie Prefecture. These journeys will naturally be slower than the Shinkansen but are perfectly viable for regional travel.

Private railway companies also play a significant role. As mentioned, the Meitetsu Railway, besides its airport line, operates an extensive network radiating from Meitetsu Nagoya Station, serving areas north, east, and south of the city, including popular day-trip destinations like Inuyama. Similarly, Kintetsu Railway connects Nagoya (from Kintetsu Nagoya Station, adjacent to the JR and Meitetsu stations) primarily with destinations south and west, including Mie Prefecture (for places like Ise and Toba) and onward towards Nara and Osaka Namba. These private lines often provide alternative or more direct routes to specific locations compared to JR lines and are not covered by the standard Japan Rail Pass (though some regional passes might include sections).

For travellers prioritizing budget over speed, highway buses (Kosoku Basu) present a very economical way to reach Nagoya from various cities across Japan. Numerous companies, including the JR Bus group, Willer Express, and Meitetsu Bus, operate daytime and overnight bus services connecting Nagoya with major centres like Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Kanazawa, Takayama, and even cities further afield. Overnight buses are particularly popular as they save on a night's accommodation cost, arriving in Nagoya early in the morning. These buses typically depart from and arrive at terminals located around Nagoya Station, most notably the Meitetsu Bus Center situated above Meitetsu Nagoya Station.

Travel times by bus are significantly longer than the Shinkansen. A trip from Tokyo to Nagoya by bus might take anywhere from 5 to 7 hours, depending on the route, number of stops, and traffic conditions, compared to under two hours by Shinkansen. Comfort levels vary greatly depending on the bus company and service type. Some buses offer standard seating, while others feature more spacious seats with greater recline, privacy curtains, onboard toilets, and Wi-Fi, particularly on premium overnight services offered by companies like Willer Express. Booking in advance is highly recommended, especially for popular routes and overnight services, and can usually be done online through the respective bus company websites (many have English interfaces) or via booking portals. While slower, the cost savings can be substantial, making highway buses a favoured choice for students, backpackers, and budget travellers.

Finally, reaching Nagoya by car is feasible, particularly if you are already undertaking a driving tour of Japan. Nagoya is well-served by the national expressway network. The Tomei Expressway connects it eastward towards Shizuoka and Tokyo, while the Meishin Expressway links it westward to Kyoto and Osaka. The Chuo Expressway provides a route through the central mountain regions towards Nagano and Tokyo. Driving offers flexibility, especially for exploring more rural areas outside the major cities. However, navigating Japanese expressways involves potentially high toll fees. Within Nagoya itself, driving can be challenging due to heavy traffic, complex road layouts (especially around the central station area), and the scarcity and high cost of parking. For most tourists focusing primarily on exploring Nagoya city and its immediate surroundings, relying on the excellent public transport network is generally far more practical and less stressful than driving and parking a car. If you do choose to drive, ensure you have the required International Driving Permit and familiarize yourself with Japanese road rules, including driving on the left side of the road.

In essence, accessing Nagoya is a relatively smooth process thanks to its superb transport links. International flyers will likely arrive via the efficient Chubu Centrair International Airport (NGO), enjoying a quick train ride into the city. Domestic travellers, particularly those coming from Tokyo or the Kansai region, will find the Tokaido Shinkansen offers unparalleled speed and convenience, delivering them directly into the heart of the city at Nagoya Station. Highway buses provide a reliable and cost-effective alternative for the budget-conscious, while conventional trains serve regional connections well. Driving remains an option, best suited for those on wider road trips encompassing areas beyond the city limits. Whichever method you choose, Nagoya awaits, ready to be explored.

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