



- Explore the regions -



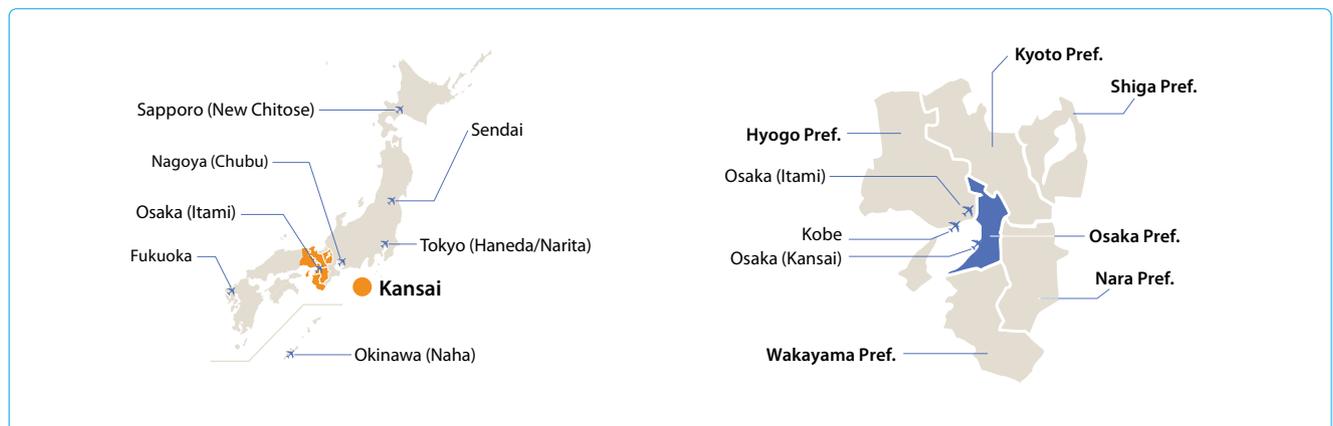
Lady Shizuka is a character in *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, a popular play of puppet theater and kabuki.

The Lively Art of Puppet Theater

In addition to wonderful outdoor activities, Kansai offers cultural highlights ranging from sacred sites and castles to pottery and tea ceremony. Among refined Japanese crafts are theater arts like noh and kabuki as well as the exciting traditional puppet theater (*bunraku*) known as *ningyo joruri*, in which large figures perform a drama with lifelike gestures and exquisite expressions thanks to adroit handling by masterful puppeteers.



Thanks to the stagecraft of puppeteers, the large-sized puppets perform with lifelike movement and highly expressive gestures.



Osaka Pref. The Magical World of Bunraku

As the main actor opens a story, accompanied by plaintive chords of the *shamisen*, the puppets make their appearance onstage under the expert handwork of puppeteers. As the large figures move freely around the stage, the audience is entranced by their movements, as though the performers were human. It is a riveting experience of Japanese theater and culture.

Along with *noh* and *kabuki*, *ningyō joruri bunraku* is one of Japan's traditional theater arts. The lines of the drama, including scene and storyline details, are spoken by the expressive voice of *tayu*, the main actor and narrator. The vibrant narrative, deep and powerful tones of *futozao* (thick-necked) *shamisen* accompaniment, and adept maneuvering by puppeteers all make for an elegant and articulate performance art.

The puppeteers work in teams of three: *omo-zukai*, the only puppeteer whose face is seen, controls the puppet's head and right hand; *hidari-zukai*, the left hand; and *ashi-zukai*, the feet. They work in harmony, following the lead of *omo-zukai*, the head puppeteer. The gaze, gesture, and gait of the puppets flow so seamlessly that their movements seem alive, conjuring a magical world onstage.

Joruri is a narrative musical performance art said to have developed around the mid-15th century, deploying its own narrative rhythms with *shamisen* accompaniment. After the popularity of songs of a puppet theater featuring the character of *Joruri-hime* (Princess *Joruri*), narrative vocal music with unique melody lines evolved and came to be

called "joruri." In Osaka, around 1600, this theater art crossed paths with puppeteering, which involved figures that performed and did acrobatics. Puppets were moved along to *joruri* narrative, and thus was formed the art of *ningyō joruri*. In later years, Chikamatsu Monzaemon, dramatist known as the Shakespeare of the East, appeared on the scene and wrote many plays themed on current events as well as history. The special narrative style of *joruri* narrator and chanter Takemoto *Gidayu* brought this theater art to even higher fame and popularity, taking the nation and the world by storm. In fact, *joruri* narrative became synonymous with *Gidayu* narration, and *ningyō joruri* established itself as a popular mainstay in the public eye.

Uemura Bunrakuken started a *joruri*



A *ningyō joruri* audience is so focused on puppets that the black-costumed puppeteers seem to disappear as the play proceeds.

school and studio in Osaka in the latter half of the 18th century, helping to further increase the popularity of the art form. This performance troupe came to be called *Bunrakuza*. It is around this time that *bunraku* became synonymous with *ningyō joruri*, a reference that remains true today.

This three-person puppeteering style and the skillful combination of three parts are unique to Japan and have come to be known as one of the world's great puppet theater arts, as reflected in registration of *ningyō joruri bunraku*



The National Bunraku Theatre, in Osaka, hosts puppet drama as well as *kabuki* and other traditional Japanese performing arts.

in 2008 as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Gidayu-style narrative, chanted in Kansai dialect, can sometimes be difficult to understand, even for a native Japanese audience. However, all components—including various stage sets and equipment, sounds of the *shamisen*, dynamic narrative and chanting of the *tayu*, skillful stagecraft by the puppeteers, and realistic gestures of the puppets—make for a highly entertaining drama. Why not visit the theater and delve into the fascinating world of puppets?

Getting There: ANA serves Osaka (Itami and Kansai) from many cities across Japan, including Tokyo (Haneda and Narita), Sapporo (New Chitose), Fukuoka, and Okinawa.



Puppet heads are among the charms of *ningyō joruri* drama—eyes, mouth, eyebrows move in sync with feelings and emote powerfully.

Looking Ahead

The next theme of Get to Know Kansai is "History," set for December, when we feature six World Heritage sites from all six prefectures of the Kansai region.

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