COMPRISED of myriad islands dotting Japan’s southern archipelago, Okinawa Prefecture’s subtropical temperatures and clear seas make it ideal for diving and other marine sports. Strongly affected by overseas influences unlike anywhere else in Japan, the land offers much more than sun, sand and beachside resorts, including a singular language, cuisine and history that make it fascinating for visitors.

After reaching Naha Airport, close to the center of Naha City on the main island of Okinawa, the first stop was Shurijo Castle Park to learn more about Okinawa’s history. Until the late nineteenth century, Okinawa was the independent Ryukyu Kingdom, and the island nation prospered as a trading hub with China, Korea, Southeast Asia as well as Japan. As the Ryukyu Kingdom developed its original culture through blending those of others and entered its golden age, its palace—Shurijo Castle—became a prosperous center for politics, diplomacy and culture. The castle’s design reveals the fusion of influences from China and Japan combined with Ryukyu’s own design aesthetics in its distinctive red colors, curved roofs and wide-open courtyards. The location is a prime tourist destination, and according to the park’s staff many of its visitors are non-Japanese.

Driving northward along the coast leads to expansive Ocean Expo Park, home to numerous attractions that include Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium. Okinawa’s waters boast an astonishing variety of marine life, all of which can be marveled at up close here. Set in a stunning natural backdrop next to the turquoise sea, this aquarium offers visitors stunning views of approximately 21,000 marine life from around 740 species.

“The feeling inside this aquarium is like diving with one’s
Shurijo Castle Park, where stylistic influences from China are clear and colorful.

Dolphins leaping high at a show at Okichan Theater in Ocean Expo Park.

The juicy shikuwasa is a major crop in Okinawa.

Dolphins leaping high at a show at Okichan Theater in Ocean Expo Park.

“Shikuwasa daughters” Sumiko Taira and Yumiko Nakaima.

AUGUST 2014  |  OKINAWA

clothes on,” Mikiko Maeshiro, the aquarium’s staff, explains. The route starts out at the top of the aquarium, and then leads visitors to deeper levels so that they can appreciate the changes in marine diversity. A Touch Pool near the entrance allows visitors to touch starfish and sea cucumbers found in shallow waters before making their way to the Coral Reef section. The path then leads to the Kuroshio Sea (Black Current) exhibit, which features a large tank holding 7,500 cubic meters of water and whale sharks—the world’s largest fish—as well as mantas and numerous other sea creatures. The route concludes at the Deep Sea exhibit, which showcases rare and mysterious fish normally found hundreds of meters under the ocean’s surface.

A little further up the coast is the village of Ogimi. Japanese already garner worldwide reputation for their longevity, and residents in this village are famous in Japan for having the longest life expectancies. The town is also known for producing around 75 percent of Okinawa’s shikuwasa—a type of citrus native to Okinawa and neighboring Taiwan.

 Appropriately enough, two “shikuwasa daughters” who are part of the fruit’s PR campaign are 96-year-old Sumiko Taira and 85-year-old Yumiko Nakaima. Taira emphatically stated that keeping active is the secret to her long life, describing how she always wakes up at 6:30 a.m. and stretches before starting her day. She still rides her bicycle around town. Nakaima, who keeps busy driving around the village on various errands, explained that she got her first driver’s license at the ripe age of 53 after her son bought her a car for her birthday.

Although all of the places noted here are located on Okinawa’s main island, the prefecture counts no fewer than 160 islands, leaving many more white sandy beaches, colorful reefs and azure waters for visitors to explore. What were once called the Ryukyus, with their profound and still-evident influences from various foreign cultures—Okinawa is bound to change everyone’s image of Japan, and give you a new perspective.