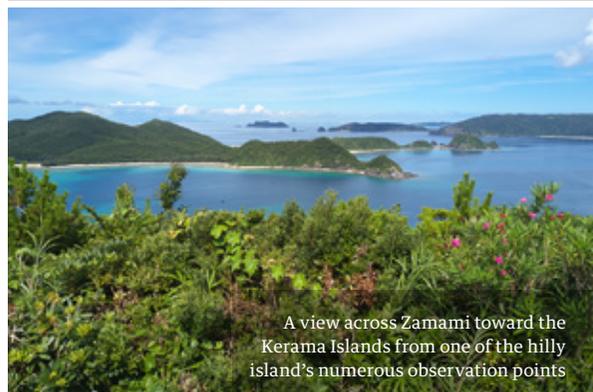


Kerama Islands: Amazing Zamami

A sea kayak expedition organized by the Kerama Kayak Center arrives at an uninhabited island close to Zamami's Ama beach.

Continuing our series introducing the thirty-four national parks of Japan, we visit the Kerama Islands National Park in Okinawa Prefecture.

ALEX HENDY



A view across Zamami toward the Kerama Islands from one of the hilly island's numerous observation points

Furuzamami beach is the closest Zamami gets to a conventional resort, with sun beds, parasols and inflatables available for rent.



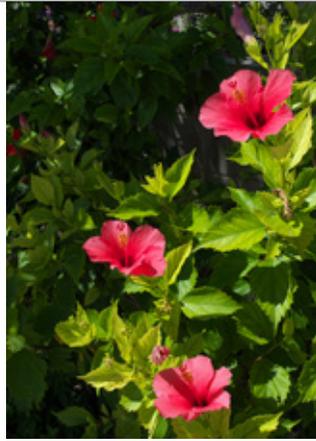
SHOALS of flying fish fizz low over the water in fright as the big ocean ferry presses westward to Zamami in the Kerama Islands. The journey from Okinawa's main-island port of Naha takes two hours on this vessel, stopping once on the way, at Aka Island. Tourists take selfies on the breezy upper deck, risking their sun hats, as a background of uninhabited islands and immaculate beaches unrolls behind them. Zamami old-timers snooze soundly on the carpets below.

One of four inhabited islands in Okinawa's remote Kerama cluster of twenty or so islands, Zamami is also one of the two local municipalities, along with its larger neighbor, Tokashiki, whose beaches, coral reefs and clear blue waters make up the Kerama Islands National Park.

The island's port village is small and its narrow streets more comfortably navigated on foot, but for the traveler keen to take in all of Zamami's 24 kilometers of coastline, the renting of a moped or mini car is recommended – the latter, like the ferry and the family-run inns, best booked in advance of arrival.

A short drive from the village to any of Zamami's elevated observation points is rewarded with spectacular views of the famed "Kerama blue" ocean and verdant, white sand-laced islands beyond. The ascent to these viewpoints, through lush tropical vegetation,





A typical Zamami village street. Hibiscus grow in abundance on the island.

is an essential part of any trip to Zamami.

But it is for immersed proximity to the extensive coral reefs that most people come to the Kerama Islands, one of the world's outstanding diving destinations. Moray eels, pygmy seahorses, dogtooth tuna and manta rays are among the incredible 1,000 or so species of fish inhabiting the 400 species of coral here. Snorkelers too find themselves in submarine paradise, as the shallow waters close to the shore drop off suddenly affording close-up views of countless colorful reef fish. Most thrillingly of all, on Ama beach, sea turtles swim just a few meters from the shore at high tide. Lifeguards alert snorkelers to the turtles' presence so there is no danger of missing out.

Ama beach is also the launch pad for a variety of other ocean sports and excursions. The tranquility of the sea here makes kayaking an attractive proposition for visitors of all ages and sea-faring abilities. Trips lasting as long as six hours can be arranged through

the Kerama Kayak Center in the village. The currents off Zamami are deceptively quick – which partly explains why the coral is so plentiful and the ocean so clear – and for safety reasons therefore certified kayak guides accompany paddlers at all times. Four-

seater Hobie trimarans, which are propelled by pedal, paddle or sail, are a laid-back alternative to the sleek and swift kayaks.

Standup paddleboarding is another water sport visitors can enjoy in Zamami while, further from the shore, sea anglers may be rewarded with a catch of giant yellowfin tuna or marlin. Photographs of notable recent catches hang in the tackle shop in the village.

In the winter, from December to April, humpback whales return to the warm waters of Zamami to breed and raise their young. Veteran whale-searching staff look out for them from the observatories and communicate the whales' location to the whale-watching boats on the sea. The villagers record the whales' tail patterns and report that the same humpbacks return to Zamami year after year.

Back on the ferry with the wind in their hair, visitors departing this beautiful island will understand that the urge to return is strong. **U**

The sunsets at Zamami, locals say, are different every day.