

Adventures on Fields of Drifting Snow

Jifubuki tour participants enter the snow field.



Aomori's Drifting Snow Tour is a popular experience with visitors that has been around for thirty years, taking advantage of a troublesome natural phenomenon for local residents called the "Jifubuki" to attract tourists.

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THE Tsugaru region is located in the western area of Aomori, the northernmost prefecture on the main island of Japan, and it is known for heavy snow in winter. Tsugaru is also known as the birthplace of Japanese author Osamu Dazai (1909-1948), whose works attract readers both in Japan and abroad even today. At the beginning of his book *Tsugaru* (or *Return to Tsugaru: Travels of a Purple Tramp*), Dazai introduces the seven types of snow that fall in the Tsugaru region: *kona-yuki* (powder snow), *tsubu-yuki* (corn snow), *wata-yuki* (cotton snow), *mizu-yuki* (slush), *kata-yuki* (spring snow), *zarame-yuki* (coarse snow), and *kohori-yuki* (ice snow).

Each of the seven types of snow in Tsugaru refers to the subtle differences in the snow's condition depending on the temperature. Besides the seven types of snow, there is fierce Jifubuki drifting snow, a natural phenomenon unique to the Tsugaru region in the middle of winter. Jifubuki refers to a fierce

weather phenomenon involving the hazy scenic effect created – sometimes the view becomes pure white – when fresh snow on the ground is blown upward by roaring winds. In the town of Kanagi, where Dazai's childhood home still stands today, the local people organize Jifubuki tours every winter as part of the unique attractions that enable tourists to dare to enjoy the fierce drifting snow.

Shu Kakuta, who initiated the experience and is now the head of the tour known as Tsugaru Jifubuki-kai, says about the trend, "Over the past thirty years, as many as 13,000 tourists visiting the region have enjoyed our Jifubuki Tours. The tour is rapidly fully booked every time because we only accept up to fifteen participants at a time for security reasons. In recent years, many participants have come from abroad, particularly from tropical regions including Hawaii and Taiwan."

Before launching the experience in his hometown of Kanagi, Kakuta had a job in Tokyo. When he returned home from Tokyo at the time, he says, "The whole town was lacking in energy, as if it was deserted. People in the town had no choice but to endure the fierce weather every winter." Given this situation, Kakuta gradually became fascinated by the idea of trying to find something that might entertain people during the wintertime. In this process, he came to remember that he had once seen a back-shot

All photos: Courtesy of Goshogawara City

photograph of local farm women trudging stoically through drifting snow. It was a picture taken by Ichiro Kojima (1924-1964), a local photographer from Aomori City.

“Heavy drifting snow often paralyze our traffic system. Jifubuki is indeed a troublesome phenomenon for the local people in winter, because it can be life threatening if you get caught in it. On the other hand, it offers a fantastic, beautiful view as expressed in the photo,” Kakuta says.

He initially proposed the tour as an event that would enable people living outside the region to experience jifubuki in Tsugaru, but his idea invited criticism from the local community, who worried that it could contribute to negative publicity for the town of Kanagi. Despite these criticisms, Kakuta’s consistent passion for his idea has finally paid off. The first Jifubuki tours were held in 1988, and they proved to be a huge success, with requests received from all over the country to make them an annual event as soon as the tour was closed for the year.

Many of the participants in the tour have greatly appreciated the rare experience, saying that they were deeply touched by the hospitality provided by the local people with their simple and unaffected personalities and the warm companionship with conversations in the Tsugaru dialect. “What seems useless to the local people could turn out to be something unusually valuable as an experience for people visiting the region. I believe that Aomori Prefecture

still has many latent assets waiting to be developed as tourism resources,” Kakuta says.

The popularity of the Jifubuki tours has spread across the entire Tsugaru region in recent years, with an emphasis on the participants and organizers enjoying the experience together and creating friendships. Jifubuki Tours marked their 30th year in 2017, and they were held in seven locations across the Tsugaru region: Imabetsu, Nakadomari, Hiranai, Asamushi, Goshogawara, Ajigasawa and Kanagi. The number of locations selected reflects the seven types of snow in Tsugaru.

Those who take the tour typically don a baggy *kakumaki*, a type of shawl made out of pure wool, and *kanjiki* (snow shoes made out of bamboo), which are traditionally used by Tsugaru residents in winter. In addition, visitors can enjoy eating local seafood, soaking in a hot spring or other regional delights, depending on the location.

Another popular tourist attraction in the Kanagi area is the Stove Train that runs on the Tsugaru Railway Company line. The Tsugaru Railway Company is a private sector local railway company that was founded in 1930. Even today, a potbelly stove containing burning coals has a spot on the train – the only such example in the world – that runs through the snow field of the Tsugaru plain, which is about a 30-minute ride from Goshogawara Station to Kanagi Station. While enjoying the snowy view out of the window, passengers can sip on hot local sake sold on the train with *surume* (dried squid and cuttlefish) prepared on the stovetop and served as quick nibbles to accompany the sake.

Visitors do not always have the luck of experiencing drifting snow that is perfect for the Jifubuki tour. When the weather is fine, some play with the other participants like children in the snow field; others enjoy being alone in the snow and adopt a philosophical outlook.

Kakuta places the utmost importance on safety. “I leave it up to the participants to make their own way to Tsugaru and book their own accommodation. Getting here must be like a riddle for them and is a big part of the fun,” he laughs. **J**



Fun and games
in the snow