

Starry Nights

A small village in Nagano Prefecture is running a hugely successful sight-seeing experience promising visitors “the best starry sky in Japan.”

TAKASHI SASAKI

NAGANO, an inland prefecture in Honshu filled with mountains ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 meters high, has many popular tourist destinations. Located in one of these in the southern part of the prefecture, Achi Village, which has a population of about 6,600, and its Hirugami Hot Springs have been able to attract tour groups with an experience called Tenku-no Rakuen: Nihon-ichi-no Hoshizora Night Tour (Paradise in the Sky: A Night Tour to the Best Starry Sky in Japan).

In Achi Village, guest numbers at the hot springs, one of the main local industries, had declined continuously for ten years or so. Faced with this major crisis, the village began offering the starlit night tours in 2011.

“Hirugami Hot Springs is a relatively new hot spring area that was discovered in 1973,” says Yuji Shirasawa, president and representative director of Achi Hirugami Tourist Bureau, a joint-stock company established in May 2016. “They have been popular due to their good spring quality and first-rate accommodation. However, there are many hot-spring areas that boast a larger scale and a longer history than the Hirugami Hot Springs, not only in Nagano Prefecture but also in many other parts of Japan. It was obvious that we could not expect the decreasing visitor numbers to recover by merely focusing on the hot springs as a selling point.”

Tenku-no Rakuen: Nihon-ichi-no Hoshizora Night Tour was a plan devised by the people in Achi Village as a way out, with Shirasawa at the center. In 2006, the Ministry of the Environment ranked Achi Village in the top category on its list of places where the darkness of the night sky is ideal for the observation of stars.

The village commenced its starlit night tour at a ski area called Heavens Sonohara on a trial basis in 2011. It was a basic program that simply guided participants to a location where the starry sky was easy to see. However, about 6,500 people took part in the program in its



A visitor on the Night Tour peers at the stars through a telescope.
Photo: Courtesy of Achi Hirugami Tourism Board

first year. This result gave Shirasawa and the others a strong sense of success and prompted them to make the tour more attractive by planning a range of programs, including live performances by musicians, explanations of the starry sky by narrators and lunar surface observation sessions using an astronomical telescope on the nights when the moon is full and the stars are hard to identify. As a result, tour participant numbers reached approximately 150,000 in 2017, more than twenty times the figure six years earlier.

“I was aware that the starry sky over Achi Village is incredible, but I had never imagined that it would lead us to a business,” offers Shirasawa. “But almost all people who live in Japanese cities say that they have never seen the Milky Way in their lives. The beautiful starry sky in Achi Village can release strong emotions in these people that nothing else can replace.”

A range of organizations involved in sightseeing had worked to promote tourism in Achi Village on their own until that point. However, none of them had produced good results. Achi Hirugami Tourist Bureau was established to address the need to integrate them in a bid to revitalize the village as a whole. Needless to say, it is an organization born through the operation of the starlit night tour. The tour not only has increased the number of tourists who visit Achi Village, but also has produced greater economic effects on the village than anticipated because the majority of visitors stay overnight at Japanese-style inns or Western-style hotels within the village and eat in local restaurants at night.

“I consider that nothing about travel is more attractive than strong emotions,” notes Shirasawa. “Unified regional initiatives with a solid sense of speed, such as the one for the starry sky in Achi Village, are indispensable for making the most of potential tourist resources. It is our job to assume this role and pass the attractive aspects of this village as a tourist destination on to the next generation.”

In addition to the starlit night tour, Achi Hirugami Tourist Bureau is putting a range of novel ideas into practice to make Achi Village more attractive, such as predawn ski lift operation in seasons when seas of clouds tend to appear and the commercial launch of an observation terrace, in a bid to enhance the area’s appeal.

It takes about 30 minutes by car to reach the Hirugami Hot Springs from the nearest train station. Achi Village is working to improve convenience for visitors from overseas by preparing direct bus routes for those who travel to the area via rail.

Shirasawa is envisaging close cooperation with neighboring cities, towns and villages that have diverse tourist resources. He believes that such cooperation will make a larger area in the southern part of Nagano Prefecture, which is commonly known as Minami Shinshu, more attractive. Achi Hirugami Tourist Bureau is about to commence initiatives for developing tours and events that will delight all visitors to Minami Shinshu, sharing the essence of the success achieved by the starlit night tour. **J**