



# Akita Inu Tourism A Dog's Tale

Kaoru Kobayashi, president of Furusawa Onsen Koyokan, with two Akita inus at her inn; left, Haru, and right, Haru's daughter, Hana. Photo: Osamu Sawaji

The home of the Akita inu breed, which has been drawing attention worldwide in recent years, is making the most of its canine charms to revitalize the community.

## OSAMU SAWAJI

**A**KITA inus are large Japanese dogs (inu) native to the northern part of Akita Prefecture, where they were historically kept for hunting purposes. Hachiko, the bronze statue in front of Shibuya Station in Tokyo, is the most famous Akita inu. Hachiko (1923-1935) is widely known as a faithful dog that kept going to Shibuya Station to meet its returning owner for about ten years after the master's untimely death. Faithfulness to owners and strong obedience are the two main characteristics of Akita inus.

Akita inus became very popular overseas and their popularity with overseas dog owners surged when a Japanese film casting Hachiko in the lead role, which had been released in 1987, was remade as a Hollywood movie titled *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* in 2009. According to Akitainu Hozonkai (Akita Inu

Preservation Society), which certifies and registers Akita inus, the number of Akita Inus in Japan registered with the Society has fluctuated between 2,000 and 3,000 in recent years, but the number of registered Akita inus overseas jumped from about 70 in 2010 to more than 4,000 at present. The popularity of Akita inus has risen further, partly because Japan gave Akita puppies as presents to Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2012 and Russian figure skater Alina Zagitova, who won the gold medal at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, in 2018.

In 2016, Odate City, the birthplace of Hachiko located in the northern part of Akita Prefecture, set up Akita Inu Tourism, a destination management organization (DMO), with three neighboring municipalities - Kita-Akita City, Kosaka Town and Kamikoani Village - to link this global popularity of Akita inus with regional revitalization. The DMO is stepping up efforts to attract tourists from Japan and overseas.

"When you check Google search trends, you find Akita inus began to significantly surpass Mount Fuji in the number of searches around 2010," says Managing Director Takumi Abe of Akita Inu Tourism. "But few people know that the northern part of Akita



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Prefecture is the birthplace of Akita inus. Our role is to encourage Akita inu lovers to take an additional interest in the assets of this area, such as its nature, food and history.”

Making information available via the Internet is one of Akita Inu Tourism’s activities. Immediately after its inauguration, Akita Inu Tourism produced a bizarre music video in which a group of singing and dancing teenage entertainers wearing Akita inu masks introduced local specialties and places of interest. The video amassed 1 million views in ten days and evoked a massive response in Japan and overseas, including media coverage.

Akita inus are not the only attraction the northern part of Akita Prefecture has to offer. There are many hot springs in this area, in addition to Lake Towada, a magnificent caldera lake, and Mt. Moriyoshi, famous for its frost-covered trees. Other attractions include a dish peculiar to the region called *kiritampo*, a traditional craft called *magewappa* and Korakukan, one of the oldest theaters in Japan. Akita Inu Tourism organized study tours for bloggers, media representatives and travel agents overseas in order to inform them about those attractions. The DMO is aggressively undertaking promotional activities in other countries, too. These activities have produced results. The number of foreign lodgers in the area increased from about 4,200 in 2014 to about 10,000 in 2018.

Places offering encounters with Akita inus are increasing, too. Furusawa Onsen Koyokan, a hot

- 1 A friendly Akita inu welcomes passengers on morning flights arriving at the Odate-Noshiro Airport in Kita-Akita City, Akita Prefecture, on the 8th, 18th and 28th of each month, in a nod to Hachiko (because “*hachi*” means “eight” in Japanese)
- 2 The building of the Akita Dog Visitor Center, which opened in May 2019, is modeled after the Shibuya Station building in the era when Hachiko would wait for his owner. A bronze statue of Hachiko stands at the Center’s entrance
- 3 Completed in 1910, Korakukan is a theater in Kosaka Town, Akita Prefecture, where various forms of drama, including kabuki, are still staged today
- 4 Steamed and mashed rice is plastered on wooden sticks, toasted and then stewed with chicken and vegetables for *kiritampo*, a one-pot meal

Photos: Osamu Sawaji (1, 2); Courtesy of Akita Inu Tourism (3, 4)

spring inn in Odate City, is one. Furusawa Onsen Koyokan began keeping a female Akita inu, then only two months old, as a poster dog in 2017. The adorable dog’s photos spread worldwide through social networking services, bringing many guests to the inn, not only from Japan but also from other countries in Asia, North America and Europe.

“We are truly amazed because we had few foreign guests previously,” says President Kaoru Kobayashi of Furusawa Onsen Koyokan. “We didn’t imagine we could change things this much just by keeping a dog.”

A tourist facility called the Akita Dog Visitor Center opened in front of JR Odate Station in May 2019 as a place offering the chance to meet Akita inus. The facility has exhibition rooms where visitors can view one or two Akita inus up close and a museum where the history and the characteristics of Akita inus are introduced. An increase in the number of places like this where locals mix with visitors from all over the world will make the area more and more attractive. **■**