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REGIONAL REVITALIZATION

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THEME FOR **MAY**:

**REGIONAL
REVITALIZATION**

Continued overcrowding in Tokyo combined with rural depopulation is predicted to have serious long-term consequences for Japan's society and economy. The Japanese government has therefore positioned regional revitalization as a key policy to address both problems.

In this issue, we introduce examples of how local authorities, organizations and individuals in regions across Japan have responded to a variety of challenges and in doing so brought new levels of vitality to their respective communities.



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ON THE COVER
Regional Revitalization
Photo: Courtesy of Onagawa Town

THE 26TH JAPAN-EU SUMMIT

On Thursday, April 25, 2019, Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, held the 26th Japan-European Union (EU) Summit with H. E. Mr. Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, and H.E. Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission in Brussels, the Kingdom of Belgium. Ahead of the Summit Meeting, a tête-à-tête meeting for approximately 20 minutes was organized. In addition, Japan-EU Joint Statement was issued on the occasion of the Summit Meeting.

The leaders shared the view that both Japan and the EU should closely cooperate toward the success of the G20 Osaka Summit in June. Prime Minister Abe requested strong support from the EU to launch the “Osaka Track” to discuss on the data governance, in particular focusing on the electronic commerce, and obtained support from the EU leaders.

The leaders also shared the view that it is a top priority for the international society to maintain the free trade system and acknowledged the

necessity of maintaining a momentum for World Trade Organization (WTO) reform, including their cooperation to ensure the proper functioning of the Appellate Body.

The leaders welcomed the entry into force of the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the commencement of the provisional application of the Japan-EU Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in February this year.

The leaders confirmed that the Japan-EU relations underwent transition to a new dimension owing to the entry into force of the EPA, and that the Agreement has generally been implemented smoothly thereafter, along with the success of the first Joint Committee of the EPA held in April this year, and acknowledged the importance of continuously promoting trade and investment between Japan and the EU based on the Agreement.



Tête-à-tête (one-on-one meeting)

Regarding the SPA, the leaders also welcomed that the first Joint Committee of the SPA was held in March this year and confirmed that they will promote the Japan-EU cooperation under the Agreement, focusing on areas including sustainable connectivity, quality infrastructure and global issues.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Abe explained that reconstruction from the earthquake disaster is top priority for Japan and requested that the EU's restriction on imports of Japanese food products from Japan be eliminated as early as possible based on scientific evidence.

The leaders also exchanged views on Brexit and regional situations including China, North Korea, Iran and Ukraine. In particular, with regard to the North Korean issue, the leaders reaffirmed close cooperation to realize the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement by North Korea of all weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles of all ranges, based on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. In addition, Prime Minister Abe requested understanding and cooperation for early resolution of the abductions issue which is the top priority, and obtained support by President Tusk and President Juncker.



Japan-EU Summit

Regional Revitalization

“Regional revitalization will help maintain the vitality of Japan as a whole,” according to Akiko Ito, Director General of the Secretariat of the Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan (see Interview, p. 6). In this issue, we home in on a range of such revitalization efforts, which vary according to the particular challenges or opportunities existing in each regional community. We introduce two towns which have “built back better” after their respective earthquake disasters; a dairy farming district that has turned the challenge of animal waste management to its advantage; a small town that has created new jobs and working styles by engaging all in the community who want to work, and another which has been energized as a preparatory camp host before the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The case studies in revitalization start and finish with two towns whose residents have leveraged previously underutilized local attractions to boost regional tourism.



Photo: Courtesy of Tomoyoshi Tada

Regional Revitalization Paves the Way for the Future of Japan

JAPAN is currently working on regional revitalization nationwide. We asked Akiko Ito, Director General, Secretariat of the Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan, Cabinet Secretariat about the purpose of regional revitalization, what has been accomplished so far and the challenges faced, and what lies ahead.

The Japanese government has positioned regional revitalization as a key policy. Why does Japan need regional revitalization?

The provisional calculations released by the private sector think tank Japan Policy Council in 2014 shocked the public. According to these provisional calculations, if the trend of excessive concentration of the population in the Tokyo area continues, by 2040 the population of women in their 20s and 30s in approximately half the total of municipalities will decline by 50% or more, with many of those municipalities facing the risk of disappearing in the future. Japan's population peaked in 2008, with rural areas in particular experiencing a decline in the number of births and a sharp decrease in population. Overcrowding in Tokyo and surrounding areas and rural depopulation will have serious consequences for Japan's society and economy. Regional revitalization is necessary to halt the decline in population and redress an excessive concentration of population in the Tokyo area. Regional revitalization will help maintain the vitality of Japan as a whole.

What targets has the government set?

In 2014, the government established the Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in accordance with the Act for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy. Looking ahead to 2060, as the Long-Term Vision it is expected that a population of around 100 million people (the current population is about 120 million) will be maintained in 2060 if the total fertility rate rises to a certain level and the Comprehensive Strategy that set forth the policy objectives and measures for five years from FY2015 has declared the four basic objectives of "Generate stable employment in regional areas," "Create a new inflow of people to regional areas," "Fulfill the hopes of the young generation for marriage, childbirth, and parenthood," and "Create regional areas suited to the times, preserve safe and secure living, and promote cooperation between regions."

The current fiscal year is the final year of the first stage of the Comprehensive Strategy. What kinds of changes are occurring in rural areas?

Sensing the impending crisis of population decline, local governments, various companies, NPOs, and other organizations are stepping up their efforts for regional development. For example, Nishiawakura Village in Okayama Prefecture is supporting venture companies that make use of the area's plentiful forest resources, leading to job creation and an increase in migrant workers. Wajima City in Ishikawa Prefecture is renovating unoccupied houses in central areas to create facilities for the elderly and child care and support



Akiko Ito, Director
General, Secretariat of the
Headquarters for Overcoming
Population Decline and
Vitalizing Local Economy in
Japan, Cabinet Secretariat

for the disabled, creating a town full of life and energy where everyone from its oldest to its youngest citizens can interact in their local community. Successful cases of regional revitalization have often been the result of people outside a particular region discovering an appeal that the local residents had failed to notice, and carrying out activities that harnessed that appeal.

On the other hand, the fact that population influx into the Tokyo area has not been checked is a serious issue. In particular, there is a large population outflow from the major regional cities to the metropolitan area. Even though the local economy is in good condition, many young people move to the Tokyo area because of the lack of preferred jobs in the regions.

The second stage of the Comprehensive Strategy will be formulated at the end of this year. Going forward, what will be important points for regional revitalization?

I think Japan still has enough potential for growth. One of the things needed for growth is diversity. Japan is home to a variety of environments, including major cities like Tokyo, remote islands and mountainous areas. It is important to create a society where people with different backgrounds

and values can harness their abilities. An increasing number of children born in Tokyo and the surrounding area know almost nothing of rural areas. By promoting the exchange of people between regional and urban areas and the movement of people into the regions, we can expect to generate fresh innovation. It is important, too, to form “mixed” communities where everyone from young people to the elderly play an active role and support each other.

Further, Japan is now aiming to realize “Society 5.0,” where social challenges can be resolved in tandem with economic development by utilizing IoT, AI and other modern technologies. The local regions are precisely where these social challenges are to be found, and where great potential exists to generate new industries to resolve those challenges. It is also necessary to develop the human resources required to achieve this locally.

Other Asian countries too are experiencing increasingly declining birthrates and aging populations. I hope that those countries can refer to the initiatives implemented by Japan, which is confronting such challenges earlier. ▮

Interview by OSAMU SAWAJI

This beautifully restored building in Tamba-Sasayama now serves as a hotel.



How a Hotel Revived a Castle Town

Tamba-Sasayama City, Hyogo Prefecture, is home to a project that aims to revitalize the local area by restoring old Japanese-style houses.

MAO FUJITA

TAMBA-SASAYAMA, Hyogo Prefecture, a city surrounded by mountains with a population of 42,000, is a castle town centered on Sasayama Castle, which was built in the early years of the Edo period (1603-1867). Tamba-Sasayama is located about one hour away from Osaka and Kyoto by car, and still retains a large number of streets and buildings influenced by Kyoto culture over 400 years as well as

buildings that inherit that tradition. The townscape around Sasayama Castle is of particular historical value and was designated as one of the National Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings in 2004.

Besides the preservation district, the Maruyama area, located a 10-minute car ride away from the center, has traditional houses standing amid abundant mountain nature. However, the depopulation

of the area led to traditional houses becoming vacant as residents left the land, leaving the abandoned houses to potentially fall into ruin.

One person who reacted to this was Yukio Kinno, representative director at NOTE Inc. Kinno founded NOTE in 2009 and started working to restore traditional houses in collaboration with local residents and NPOs, seeking support from banks and the authorities. By that time, seven out of



Village Maruyama



A Sasayama hotel bedroom



Breakfast at Village Maruyama

twelve houses in the Maruyama area were already empty and the population had shrunk to twenty persons, meaning that the area was on the verge of disappearing.

NOTE held workshops with the local residents, continuously discussing a vision for the area's future. Three 150-year-old unoccupied houses in the village were remodeled to create a single lodging house for rent, and an annex and storehouse were turned into a restaurant. In October that year, Village Maruyama opened. Residents are responsible for providing services such as reception, cleaning and breakfast at the lodging houses in Village Maruyama. Breakfast is homemade black bean miso soup and Maruyama rice, prepared with plenty of locally grown ingredients. Visitors can enjoy dinner at

the restaurants in the village. One offers game dishes such as wild boar and deer, French cuisine using Tajima beef from Hyogo Prefecture and fish from Awaji Island. The other, which has been awarded one Michelin star, specializes in soba buckwheat noodles.

Village Maruyama is popular as a place where you can experience Japanese traditional living in a beautiful landscape. Today, it is visited by guests from home and abroad.

“The response was more enthusiastic than we expected and today, nine years since it opened, the village is a vibrant place. Over the next ten years, we plan to restore the remaining vacant houses, with a view to attracting inbound tourists,” says Kinno.

Next, NOTE worked on the restoration of traditional houses in the center of Tamba-Sasayama. In 2015, NOTE remodeled four traditional houses and started the first hotel business in the country in response to the 2014 designation of the entire area of Hyogo, Osaka and Kyoto as a Kansai National Strategic Special Zone and the approval of the Special Exemption to the Hotel Business Act for Historic Buildings. The key feature of the business is that one of the traditional houses dotted around Sasayama Castle was turned into the hotel's reception, its five guest rooms and

a restaurant, with the three other houses turned into a total of six rooms. After checking in at the front desk, guests enjoy the beautiful castle town as they make their way to their rooms.

The concept for the hotel is to make the entire castle town of Tamba-Sasayama into “a single hotel.” Aspects of many of Japan's ancient traditions can be found in Tamba-Sasayama, such as a castle, a Shinto shrine with a noh stage, and festivals. Locating the front desk and restaurant away from the accommodation means that guests have to leave their room and walk around the castle town, being touched by the hearts of residents who cherish Tamba-Sasayama's nature, history and culture.

Currently, NOTE Inc. is restoring around fifty unoccupied traditional houses, including ten accommodation facilities in Tamba-Sasayama, to create facilities such as restaurants, cafés, workshops and galleries. A sake brewery in the old capital of Nara is also being remodeled into a hotel. Such activities, which started in a small village, attracted tourists, encouraged people to move in from urban areas, and contributed to the creation of employment opportunities. They have had ripple effects too, such as the passing on of traditional architectural techniques, and the ripples continue to spread. 



Yukio Kinno, representative director of NOTE Inc.



Seapal-Pier Onagawa is alive with many local people and tourists

Tsunami Recovery and New Town Development

Heavily damaged by the tsunami which followed the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011, Onagawa Town in Miyagi Prefecture has achieved safety and renewed vigor by rebuilding its urban district in a compact form.

OSAMU SAWAJI

ONAGAWA Town in Miyagi Prefecture is located on the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region of northeast Japan, which is characterized by its many intricate small inlets and bays. An abundance of fishery products are caught year round off Onagawa in waters close to the island of Kinkasan, one of the world's most productive fishing grounds. Onagawa has thus developed as a port town based on the fishing and marine product processing industries.

However, the Great East Japan Earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011 inflicted devastating damage on the town. A tsunami close to 15 meters high left 827 people dead and missing among a population of about 10,000, and destroyed almost all the buildings along the coast. Administrative functions were hamstrung and the town's industrial foundations

All photos: Courtesy of Onagawa Town

were almost entirely lost.

The town worked hard to recover, however, drawing for courage on a short but touching poem composed by a boy from the town immediately after the earthquake: "Onagawa was not washed away. It will be reborn into a new Onagawa. The people will never give up. To feel the joy of living in a new Onagawa."

About two months after the earthquake, the town established the Restoration Plan Formulation Committee consisting of experts in urban planning and representatives of the chamber of commerce and women's society. The Committee held public hearings and worked on formulating restoration plans reflecting the townspeople's opinions. About six months after the earthquake, the town decided on the restoration plans and started building a new port town based on the basic vision of disaster reduction.

Before the earthquake, many Onagawa people lived on the limited area of flat land surrounded by mountains along the coast. To reestablish itself as a town where people can live in safety, the planners cut into the mountains, developed residential areas, raised the embankment of the flat land with the cut soil, concentrated educational, medical, transport, commercial and administrative centers around



- 1 JR Onagawa Station was designed by Shigeru Ban. Inside the station building is the bathhouse Onagawa Onsen Yupo'po
- 2 The central area of Onagawa Town immediately after the earthquake
- 3 Onagawa Police Station, which was overturned by the tsunami, is being preserved as an earthquake memorial

Onagawa Station and the port of Onagawa, and reconstructed a compact central urban district. The intention was to reproduce a town that could continue to create liveliness, even amid the acceleration of depopulation, by concentrating the flows of people from residential areas to a central urban district.

JR Onagawa Station reopened in March 2015, four years after the earthquake. The new station building, featuring a white roof based on an image of a black-tailed gull in flight, was designed by world-famous architect Shigeru Ban. Inside the station building is the hot spring facility Onagawa Onsen Yupo'po. The wall of the bathhouse is decorated with a beautiful tile painting by Hiroshi Senju, a renowned Japanese painter. An observation deck on the third floor affords a view of Onagawa Town and Onagawa Bay. Onagawa Station made a new start as the gateway to the town.

In addition, in December 2015, Seapal-Pier Onagawa, a commercial facility based on the concept of “a town with a park from which people can enjoy seeing the sea,” opened along a brick promenade linking Onagawa Station and the port of Onagawa. This facility is managed and operated by a town development company that was established by a partnership between the public and private sectors, such as Onagawa Town and its chamber of commerce. Seapal-Pier Onagawa is not only a place where people both

inside and outside the town can gather to enjoy the landscape surrounded by mountains and the sea, but is also designed in a way that enables it to work as an evacuation route along which the brick road leads to high ground in case of disaster.

Hideki Doi, an official from the Industrial Promotion Division of Onagawa Town, says, “Inside the facility, not only did business recommence after the earthquake, but new businesspeople from both inside and outside the town also established about thirty shops such as restaurants, souvenir shops and daily commodities shops. This makes the place more lively than it was before the earthquake, attracting many tourists as well as local residents.”

As the new townscape is being developed, a memorial monument was built, structural remnants that remained after the earthquake were preserved and the younger generations took action to convey the memory of the earthquake to future generations. In February 2013, students from Onagawa Junior High School played a central role in launching the Onagawa Inochinosekihi project of building stone monuments with lessons from the earthquake inscribed on them at all twenty-one beaches in the town. Seventeen monuments have been built to date by donations collected under the slogan of “Protecting lives 1,000 years on.” The boy who composed the inspirational poem became an official in the Onagawa Town government in 2018 after graduating from high school and joined the members who would work to restore the town and create a new Onagawa.

Onagawa Town is being reborn into a new town full of vigor, without forgetting the earthquake. **11**



A Village that Recovered Miraculously from the Verge of Extinction

A 2016 survey showed that due to the ongoing depopulation of rural areas, settlements where more than 50% of villagers are aged 65 or older and are therefore at risk of vanishing in the future account for 20.6% (around 15,000 villages) of all hamlets in Japan. Iketani Village in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture is one of these settlements. However, this village took a major earthquake in 2004 as an opportunity to promote interactions with people from urban areas, and by escaping from the crisis of extinction in this way achieved something more than mere recovery from the quake.

KYOKO KATO

IKETANI Village in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture is one of the snowiest areas in Japan. Approximately two hours from Tokyo by Shinkansen and conventional railway lines, the village is surrounded by beautiful terraced paddy fields on slopes in the mountains. In the 1960s, approximately 210 people in forty households lived in the settlement. However, it suffered from a continuous outflow of its population to urban areas, and when it was severely damaged in the Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake in 2004,

its population decreased to just thirteen people in six households. With a growing sense of crisis, the residents of the village organized the Tokamachi Regional Development Planning Committee (currently the NPO Chiikiokoshi [lit. Community Development]) and began to accept volunteers who would help them with snow shoveling, farm work, and other tasks as well as post-earthquake reconstruction work. Tomoyoshi Tada, who now serves as the director-general of NPO Chiikiokoshi, participated in the reconstruction support in 2009 as a volunteer from Tokyo.

“Iketani Village is a depopulated community that is located deep in the mountains. Accordingly, before I came here, I somehow had the impression that it was a closed community. When I actually came here, however, I found that it was the complete opposite to my impression. I was surprised by the welcoming atmosphere, and the people in the village were cheerful and talked to me in a friendly manner.”

Success in keeping Iketani Village alive after it was on the verge of extinction will definitely provide a clue as to how to revitalize all the farming and mountain villages in Japan that face similar issues, such as a shortage of farming successors and the degradation of forest lands. Moved by the big



- 1 Tomoyoshi Tada and his family, who moved from Tokyo to Tokamachi
- 2 The terraced rice fields of Iketani Village
- 3 Volunteers plant rice with local people



otherwise continue to engage with the villages after undertaking the above activities for one to three years. In fiscal 2018, 5,530 people are engaging in the activities. Tada immigrated from Tokyo to Iketani Village with his wife and son, who was two years old at the time. After completing his three-year term, he decided to stay in the village and continue to work as a member of NPO Chiikiokoshi.

In addition to operating the main business of producing rice by using spring water and selling it, NPO Chiikiokoshi organizes tours for the collection of mountain vegetables and rice planting events, and accepts interns who wish to experience life in the village. During the six years from 2013, it accepted fifty-six interns, ranging from teenagers to those in their 60s. Of them, eighteen people in fifteen households have settled down in Tokamachi. Tada believes that what led them to live there permanently was their friendly relationships with the local residents, which they developed through a wide range of activities including farming work and assistance in event organization. The population of Iketani Village has now increased to twenty-one people in nine households, including six children aged from one to eleven years. While the number of residents is by no means large, the village is about to recover from the verge of extinction.

“Rural areas have a lot of potential, including their beautiful nature and food. What I consider to be most important among them is the people. People in the communities, not the local governments, should take the initiative in drawing attention to local treasures and engaging with people from urban areas. I think that this will lead to local revitalization,” said Tada.

The goal of NPO Chiikiokoshi is for the village to exist for 100 years. The basis of its livelihood will be stronger if the local procurement of clothing, food, housing, and energy such as electricity, water and gas becomes possible in the future. People including Tada will continue to take on challenges to develop a village where people can continue to live with a sense of security until the next generation. 

vision, positive attitude and enthusiasm of the local people, in February 2010 Tada applied for the Local Vitalization Cooperator, a program of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications that had been launched in the same year. Under this program, municipal governments solicit urban residents who are interested in life in a rural area and intend to live in an underpopulated area to participate in activities for developing the local communities, engage in farming, forestry, or fishery, or provide livelihood support to local residents. It is aimed at having participants live in the communities permanently or

A Town Producing Milk and Hydrogen

The livestock farming area Shikaoi Town, Hokkaido is implementing initiatives to improve the local environment, prevent global warming, and revitalize local industries, utilizing a plant that produces biogas from livestock excreta to “create sustainable and vibrant industries.”

OSAMU SAWAJI

HOKKAIDO is a major hub of beef and dairy farming utilizing wide tracts of land. The large volumes of livestock excreta produced on the farms have resulted in problems such as soil and water pollution, as well as foul-smelling air.

Shikaoi Town, located almost in the middle of Hokkaido, is working to alleviate these problems while harnessing livestock excreta as a resource at the same time. The population of the town is around 5,500, while the number of cows is around 20,000. In 2007, Shikaoi Town constructed the Shikaoi Environmental Preservation Center, and began creating a biomass resource from the excreta of dairy cows. The center ferments excreta collected at local dairy farms in dedicated containers to produce odorless liquid fertilizer and biogas. Because the cow feed used at the dairy farms is plant matter, the biogas

made from excreta is a carbon-neutral fuel that does not increase carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere when burned. The liquid fertilizer is sprayed on the fields and biogas is used to power the generators. As well as being used to operate machinery in facilities, electricity produced by biogas is sold to power companies. In addition, efforts are being made to create new industries such as mango cultivation and sturgeon breeding using water heated by residual heat from power generation. The treatment of excreta at the center not only alleviates soil and water pollution and foul-smelling air, but also helps reduce the time spent and costs incurred by dairy farmers in processing the excreta.

Since 2015, in order to further reduce CO₂ emissions and increase the possible uses for biogas, attempts have been made to manufacture hydrogen utilizing the biomass produced at the center. Hydrogen production equipment, hydrogen stations, and other equipment have been newly installed in the Shikaoi Hydrogen Farm established inside the center, and the “Verification project of hydrogen supply chain utilizing hydrogen from livestock excreta” commissioned by Japan’s Ministry of the Environment is being implemented. With the cooperation of Shikaoi Town, the project is being implemented by Air Water Inc., Kajima Corporation, Nippon Steel



A fuel cell-powered car and forklift refuel at a hydrogen station in the Shikaoi Environmental Preservation Center
Photo: Osamu Sawaji



Hydrogen fuels the Center's sturgeon-breeding tanks
Photo: Osamu Sawaji

Pipeline & Engineering Co., Ltd. and Air Products Japan K.K., and is planned to run until FY2021. Shikaoi Hydrogen Farm is the first facility in the country to make hydrogen using livestock excreta, and extremely rare worldwide.

“The project targets to build a hydrogen energy supply chain, from production to transport and use. It aims to promote medium- and long-term measures against global warming by demonstrating the effects of decarbonization of hydrogen production by employing renewable energy – biogas – and practical utilization of hydrogen. We aim to be a model case for the coming hydrogen society by realizing a town which locally produced and consumed hydrogen and which does not emit CO₂ when it is used,” says Tomohiro Inoue, Senior Manager of the Engineering Integration Department of Air Water.

At the Shikaoi Hydrogen Farm, hydrogen is generated by the reaction between methane gas extracted from biogas and water vapor, in a hydrogen manufacturing device. The hydrogen is then transferred into racks of cylindrical tanks called curdles. The hydrogen in the curdles is used for fuel cells installed in a fuel cell vehicle, forklift and sturgeon breeding facilities. Curdles are also supplied to dairy farmers in the town and to a tourist facility in the neighboring Obihiro City.

If an efficient hydrogen supply chain can be established, dairy farming in Shikaoi will change dramatically. Each cow produces some 23 tons of excreta per year. With this volume of waste, it is possible to produce enough hydrogen to power a fuel cell car over

Hydrogen gas holders
Photo: Osamu Sawaji



a distance of around 10,000 km. That is comparable to the average annual mileage of Japanese cars for personal use. Dairy farmers consume an enormous amount of energy for daily tasks such as feeding, water supply, milking, milk preservation, and cleaning, resulting in costly gas and electricity bills. If the energy required for these tasks could be provided by hydrogen derived from livestock excreta, management costs would be reduced, leading to the revitalization of regional dairy farming.

“In view of the large-scale power failure that occurred at the time of the Hokkaido Eastern Iburi Earthquake in September 2018, there are high expectations of hydrogen energy as an emergency power source. Going forward, we would like to tackle the issues of hydrogen transportation methods and cost reduction, working toward the realization of a hydrogen supply chain,” says Tadashi Ohno, senior manager of the Marketing Group, Environmental Engineering Division of Kajima.

In the near future, Shikaoi will be a sustainable and vibrant town famous not only for its milk but also for its hydrogen. **7**

Shikaoi Environmental
Preservation Center
Photo: Courtesy of Shikaoi Town



A Small-town Strategy

Supporting Child Rearing and Personal Connections

Making a Skill into a Job: A skillful tailor was commissioned to do needlework jobs, and is now planning and selling her own products



The government and people of Nagi, a town in Okayama Prefecture, have come together to support child rearing and new ways of working in an attempt to make a path for the future of the town.

Registrants go to work along with their children



Corporate Supporters: With requests from corporations, local workers check product assortments or act as product monitors



Skills are checked, and data entry work is done by those who meet the standards



KUMIKO SATO

NAGI, a small town with a population of 5,800 located in northeastern Okayama Prefecture, has established the Nagi Comprehensive Strategy for Creating Town, People, and Jobs to preserve the town's vitality and industrial capacity while maintaining a population of 6,000.

The strategy is based on the Act on Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan, which was announced in November of the previous year, and together with reoccurring resident-run workshops, is centered on the vitalization of the local economy through support of proper child rearing and working style reform.

Amidst the merging of cities, towns, and villages that began at the beginning of the 2000's across Japan, Nagi decided to remain an independent town despite its small size, and moved forward with measures to strengthen support of child rearing as a pillar of the town's autonomy. As a result, the total fertility rate, which stood at 1.41 in 2005 (national average in 2005: 1.26), grew to 2.81 in 2014 (national average in 2014: 1.42) (recently, the rate stood at 2.39 in 2017,

All photos: Courtesy of Nagikara

with the national average at 1.43 the same year).

The strategy is a meaningful attempt to strengthen this kind of child-rearing support while also activating the economy through establishing new industries. Nagikara, a general incorporated association that grew out of this process, was designated by the town of Nagi as an organization promoting local revitalization, and continues to develop a variety of projects as a leader of the town's strategy.

The Shigoto Konbini (Job Convenience Store) is one such exemplary effort. It is a program to connect local and outside businesses with women of child-bearing age, retired senior citizens, and others in the town who were often not workers in the past, and since its inception in 2017, there have been 181 registrants resulting in an extraordinary 23 million yen (210,000 US dollars) in total compensation.

"Originally, local businesses complained that there weren't enough workers in the town. We also heard from many mothers who were currently raising children, saying that they wanted to work during their free time. So I thought we should create a plan to connect businesses with mothers who want to work," says Akiko Ichii, Nagikara's representative director. Ichii asked Hatara Collabo Inc., an HR consulting firm



Chomin Sensei (Local Teachers): Twelve people of various ages, from 30 to over 70, act as teachers of balloon art, garden pruning and more

in Okayama City, for cooperation, and Shigoto Konbini began through this public-private partnership.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing from the beginning. Ayako Kusaka, CEO of Hatara Collabo Inc., says that, "both local and outside businesses and local residents registered with Shigoto Konbini have their own individual circumstances. We needed to properly approach this."

With Shigoto Konbini, businesses do not hire registrants, but instead commission them to do jobs, and the commissioned work is completed through short-term work sharing by registrants. Through creating a team system, registrants can help one another in managing time, distributing work load and so on. Additionally, Shigoto Sutando (Job Stand), the home base facility for Shigoto Konbini, has been set up with an open space where children can play, enabling working registrants to bring their children and also do their jobs.

"However, we felt like there was only so far the business could go with just commissioned work. So from 2018, we started an initiative for the workers to create jobs themselves," says Hatara Collabo Inc.'s Shohei Inoue. This led to further development at Shigoto Konbini.

Among the projects established are Chomin Sensei (Local Teachers), where registrants teach their knowledge and skills, Making a Skill into a Job, and Corporate Supporters, where jobs are created through utilization of skills. And through the idea of one woman teaching needlework through Local Teachers, Shigoto Konbini is promoting an initiative that takes children's old clothes, makes them into patchwork, and creates products from the patchwork designs. Additionally, with the Corporate Supporters project, registrants planned gift merchandise for an egg producer. The producer implemented the detailed plan right away as it reflected the opinions of consumers, and sales have been great.

Ichii says, "each of the registrants has become a sole proprietor, and you can see the results of how they have connected with and are contributing to the local society. I think this is very significant."

The core of the Shigoto Konbini project lies in the creation of new working styles, and is not limited to employment support. Moving forward, local residents will take over the administration of Shigoto Konbini, aiming to create a town full of working people with a cheerful desire to work and to make Nagi itself into a brand. **V**



Elementary school children get their first experience of fencing
Photo: Courtesy of Tagawa City

A Community Re-Energized by the Olympic and Paralympic Games

Tagawa City, Fukuoka Prefecture, is preparing to host a preparatory camp for a foreign national team in advance of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Three years have passed since the city started a campaign to invite overseas teams, and the awareness of its citizens has changed through initiatives based on international sports exchange.

MAO FUJITA

TAGAWA City, which is located in the middle of Fukuoka Prefecture, once thrived as a coal mining city. The two chimneys erected in Coal Memorial Park that represent Tagawa City's history of coal mining were designated as national registered tangible cultural properties and are also a symbol of tourism. Currently, the city is preparing to welcome the preparatory camps of overseas national teams that will participate in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games through cooperation between the public and private sectors.

In 2016, Tagawa City was registered as a host town for exchanges with the athletes who would participate in the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. In 2018, the city held exchanges with Paralympic athletes and was registered as a host town having a "harmonious and inclusive society" that would promote those ideals, such as by building towns based on the concept of universal design and the barrier-free concept. It was decided that the city would host the German wheelchair fencing team.

Japan and Germany have maintained the Junior Sports Club Simultaneous Exchange since 1974, mutually sending junior sports clubs and nurturing leaders with rich international experiences through homestays and sports exchanges. Tagawa City participated in this program in 2012 and continued to have exchanges in 2016 and 2018.

Against this background, Tagawa City chose to invite Germany. Hiroyuki Hirakawa, head of the Mayor's Public Affairs Office, said, "I paid a sixteen-day inspection visit to Germany in 2016. During this visit, I met the German wheelchair fencing team and proposed Tagawa City's plans for the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. German officials gave me an unofficial agreement on staying in our city for the team's preparatory camp on the condition that the city's general gymnasium would be barrier-free."

Tagawa City improved the gymnasium and installed the latest air conditioners. Because there are no barrier-free accommodation facilities in the city, fifteen "trailer houses" will be installed as movable



Fifteen “trailer houses” will be built close to the Tagawa City gymnasium for wheelchair athletes
Photo: Courtesy of Tagawa City

accommodation facilities for people in wheelchairs in the parking area next to the gymnasium. After the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, the city plans to use those facilities as a sports training camp and an emergency evacuation site in case of a disaster.

In addition, the Business Council for Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020, local governments and local social welfare councils have collaborated to implement a barrier-free awareness program in which citizens experience what it is like to go up and down stairs in a wheelchair or when blind, transforming their understanding of the challenges facing people with disabilities. The city has also created barrier-free maps as well as voice guides in five languages explaining how to use the restrooms.

In 2016, Tagawa City started to employ German nationals as coordinators of international relations to facilitate international exchange and support its campaign to invite overseas teams. Annemarie Günzel, who became the second coordinator of international relations in August 2017, moderated an event on Deutscher Sportbund (German Olympic Sports Confederation) (the fencing category), which was held in Hamburg in August 2018, and a signing ceremony held between Fukuoka Prefecture and Tagawa City. She supports the city’s campaign to invite overseas teams using her skills in German, Japanese and English.

Günzel said, “The first time I visited Tagawa City as a coordinator of international relations, I was worried that I did not know much about the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics’ events and systems. However, I gained a great sense of satisfaction from



A barrier-free awareness exercise
Photo: Courtesy of Tagawa City



Annemarie Günzel, coordinator of international relations (center) with Hirooyuki Hirakawa, head of the Mayor’s Public Affairs Office (right) and Aki Fujii, a City official (left)
Photo: Mao Fujita

communicating German culture to citizens by translating and interpreting documents and providing easy German language and cooking lessons.”

In November 2018, a paper lantern festival celebrating Saint Martin’s Day was held in a shopping street in the city. At this traditional German event, Günzel taught elementary school students how to make and decorate lanterns. German dishes and drinks were served at the event.

In March 2019, Belarusian National Paralympic Committee members paid an inspection visit to Tagawa City and made a provisional agreement for the city to be the site of the Belarusian wheelchair fencing team’s preparatory camps for the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics.

In response, citizens began to raise their voices, saying, “I want to work as a volunteer using English and German,” and “I want to understand Belarusian culture as well as German culture.”

Three years have passed since Tagawa City started its campaign to invite overseas teams, and the citizens are aware that their city will be a host town, with the mood rising toward 2020. The city, which once thrived from coal mining, is getting a new start as a city of international sports exchange. **■**

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

AKITA 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. **■**

Osaka Castle

G20 Osaka Summit 2019

The G20 Osaka Summit will be held at the end of June. In this article, we outline the summit and introduce some of the various attractions of Osaka, the summit venue.

OSAMU SAWAJI

The G20 Osaka Summit will be held at Intex Osaka in Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture, on June 28 and 29. The G20 Summit is an annual international conference involving the participation of the leaders of nineteen countries including Japan and the European Union (EU). This is the first time that Japan assumes the G20 Summit's presidency. Every year, the

G20 Summit is attended by the G20 leaders, leaders of invited guest countries and representatives of invited guest international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

The official name of the G20 is the "Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy." The G20's objective has been to facilitate the strong growth of the world economy as the "premier forum for



- 1 Intex Osaka
- 2 Dotonbori
- 3 Takoyaki

All photos: ©Osaka Convention & Tourism Bureau

international economic cooperation", representing more than 80% of the global GDP.

The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 triggered the widespread international recognition that the discussion about the international financial systems needed the participation of major emerging market countries in addition to the G7 members. In 1999, the 1st G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting was held.

Subsequently, the conference was upgraded to the head of state level to cope with the global financial crisis in 2008 and the 1st G20 Summit was held in Washington, D.C. The G20 Osaka Summit will be the 14th.

In recent years, the G20 has been a forum to discuss not only economics and trade but also global issues such as development, climate change, and health that have immense impacts on the global economy. The G20 Osaka Summit will send a strong message of unity through the G20's commitment to leading global economic growth by promoting free trade and innovation, contributing to resolving environmental and global issues such



as climate change and ocean plastic waste, and the promotion of a society in which all women shine.

Traffic will be regulated around Intex Osaka, the venue, during the G20 Osaka Summit.

G20 MEMBERS

Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Republic of South Africa, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, and European Union (EU)

OSAKA, THE SUMMIT VENUE

Osaka, the venue for the G20 Osaka Summit, has been called the “city of water.” Osaka developed its logistical economy using the sea, rivers and waterways around Osaka Castle after the opening of the port of Naniwatsu, a gateway to trade with Asian countries, in the fifth century. In the Edo period (1603–1867), a system for gathering many commodities from across the country and transporting them to where they were in demand was established. Osaka thus became a merchant city referred to as “Japan’s Kitchen.” Osaka, with its rich mentality of embracing new ideas,

became the birthplace of many global companies after the Meiji period (1868–1912). In recent years an increasing number of cutting-edge technology companies in the bio and life science industries have established themselves in Osaka.

In Osaka, Japan’s Kitchen, a rich food culture was also born. The usage of *dashi* stock, an extract from kelp and bonito which characterizes Japanese-style food is particular. It is used for flavoring variety of meals, including the soup noodles such as *udon*, and the batter of *konamon*, flour-based cuisines such as *takoyaki*, octopus balls and *okonomiyaki*, the savory Japanese pancake.

It is a great pleasure to eat these foods while traveling in Osaka. Dotonbori, Osaka’s largest business area, has a vibrant atmosphere alive with tourists and local people year-round and where every kind of restaurant can be found.

Public entertainment also thrives in Osaka and a wide variety of music and theatrical plays ranging from classical to modern are performed. Particularly popular in Osaka is *owarai*, meaning “laughter” and referring to forms of comedy. You can enjoy watching *rakugo*, a traditional comedic storytelling act, and *manzai*, a style of Japanese stand-up comedy, at theaters.



There are also many places to see on the outskirts of Osaka. One of them is Nintoku-tenno-ryo Kofun, one of the world’s largest mounded tombs with a mound length of 486 meter, built around the fifth century. Around Nintoku-tenno-ryo Kofun, located on the outskirts of Osaka, less than one hour by train from JR Osaka Station, is a promenade approximately 2.8 kilometers long that you can enjoy walking along and feeling the atmosphere of ancient times. The Japanese government is working to have Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group, including Nintoku-tenno-ryo Kofun, inscribed on World Heritage List.

In 2025, Osaka will host its second world exposition, having previously hosted Expo 1970. Expo 2025 will be held in the Yumeshima district, guided by the slogan, “Designing Future Society for Our Lives.” Osaka, which has a long and rich culture of nurturing enterprising spirit, can show the world an ideal future of society. 🇯🇵



“Sophia” Wisdom for Reducing Electric Power Loss

A new power semiconductor device using gallium oxide to achieve less electric power loss has been developed. The innovation is expected to greatly contribute to the energy-saving and miniaturization of electronic products.

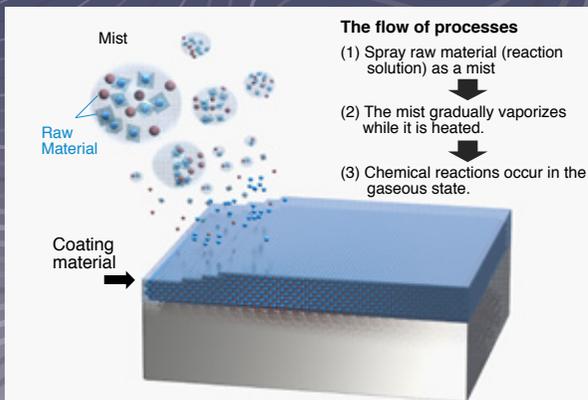
HIROSHI SAKURAI

Electronic products, large and small, such as AC adapters, home electric appliances and electric cars, use power semiconductor devices. Power devices are used for power conversion: inverters change direct current into alternating current and converters change alternating current into direct current. Electronic products are becoming increasingly energy-savings oriented, and there is growing demand for high-quality and low-cost power devices. There is cutthroat competition for the development of such power devices among companies both at home and abroad.

One of the major problems for power device developers is how to reduce electric power loss. For current power devices, electric power is lost in the conversion between direct current and alternating current. Electrical goods, such as AC adaptors or computers,



Toshimi Hitora, president of FLOSFIA
Photo: Hiroshi Sakurai



Courtesy of FLOSFIA

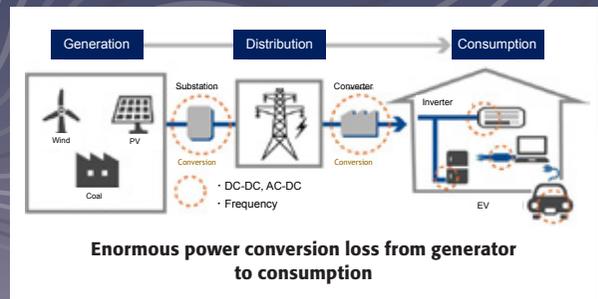
generate heat when in use. This is because some electricity is lost in the form of waste heat. It is estimated that 10% of the total electricity generated in Japan is lost in power conversion. That is, 10% of Japan's electricity ends up as waste. However, reducing electric power loss has been considered a difficult problem to solve because of the material properties of silicon, the material most commonly used in semiconductors.

FLOSFIA Inc., headquartered in Kyoto, founded in 2011, succeeded in developing a low-power-loss and low-cost power device by using α -Ga₂O₃ (Corundum Structured Gallium Oxide), a material first created at Kyoto University in 2008.

Gallium oxide has attracted attention as a semiconductor substance that, like silicon carbide and gallium nitride, could replace silicon. The difficulty of producing high-quality, low-cost gallium oxide using conventional semiconductor manufacturing methods, however, made it extremely difficult to make profitable power devices.

Toshimi Hitora, president of FLOSFIA, says, "Engineers working for major companies said that it was impossible to commercialize gallium oxide power devices. Major corporations would not do it, so it was a great opportunity for a venture company like us to be the first."

The core technology for making α -Ga₂O₃ is the MISTDRY method. The method entails heating and vaporizing the raw materials into a mist, generating chemical reactions in their gaseous state to form



Courtesy of FLOSFIA

a thin film. Because this method does not need an expensive vacuum device, unlike in conventional semiconductor manufacturing, production costs can be reduced to a tenth of those for silicon carbide-made power devices. Moreover, the method does not use environment-polluting substances like cyanide, so it has the additional benefit of being environmentally friendly.

FLOSFIA created an α -Ga₂O₃ power device in 2016 that reduced electric power loss significantly over silicon-made power devices manufactured by other companies. FLOSFIA expects that their power devices will be soon installed in AC adaptors and home electronics, as well as in industrial devices, such as robots and X-ray equipment, from 2020.

FLOSFIA's technology has attracted the attention of major companies. In 2018, FLOSFIA announced that it would start jointly developing low-power-loss, low-cost, miniaturized, light-weight power devices for hybrid and electric cars with automobile parts manufacturers, aiming to bring them to market by 2025. The use of power devices with reduced electric power loss will extend the mileage and reduce vehicle body weight.

Hitora says, "I believe that α -Ga₂O₃ power devices have the potential to have a huge impact on industry. Our goal is to produce devices that meet public demand and contribute to creating a new industry."

FLOSFIA's name represents the company's goal to put the polish on the "flow" of "sophia" wisdom and to flow it back into society, thereby contributing to the progress of humankind. The company is just taking the first steps now. 



All photos: Courtesy of Alexander Niser



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Promoting the Authentic Charm of Minami Shinshu

Alexander Niser lives in the village of Urugi, Nagano Prefecture, where he acts as a Local Vitalization Cooperator, discerning the merits of Japanese tradition and promoting its beauty to the outside world.

KUMIKO SATO



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Urugi is a small alpine village with a population of less than 550 residents, located in the southern part of Nagano Prefecture adjacent to Aichi Prefecture. Local Vitalization Cooperator Alexander Niser (hereinafter referred to as Alex) is a Belgian-born German who utilizes his language skills in Japanese, English, German, French, and Italian to convey the appeal of the village both in Japan and overseas. Although less well-known than other famous tourist spots in Nagano Prefecture such as the towns of Karuizawa and Hakuba, Urugi is endowed with a wealth of natural beauty owing to its location surrounded by mountains and rivers.

In order to promote the charm of the village abroad, Alex established the Urugi International Center, a base with guest house accommodation which he soft launched in February 2019.

“Urugi is beautiful in all seasons, and the villagers are warm and kind, just like family. There are plenty of great activities on offer. As well as walking and cycling, you can try your hand at rice farming, for example,” says Alex.

As a university student, Alex studied abroad in Sydney, Australia, where he met a Japanese student who later became his wife. The couple moved to Aichi Prefecture, Japan, where Alex found a job as a language teacher and later as a patent proofreader in the automotive industry. During his holidays, he would travel around the country on his motorbike, to places such as Hokkaido or Kyushu. One area that attracted him was the southern part of Nagano Prefecture called Minami Shinshu. With its abundant natural environment of mountains and rivers, he decided that this was where he wanted to raise his children. After repeated visits to Minami Shinshu, a friend living in Urugi introduced him to the village’s mayor, who showed him a traditional alpine house that was over 100 years old and had been left unused for more than 10 years. At first, he rented the house as a family home for himself, his wife and his two children. However, feeling that it would be a pity for the house to be used only as their own residence, Alex came up with a plan to open it up as a cultural exchange center with accommodation facility, and submitted a proposal to Urugi Village for an Urugi International Center. The proposal was assessed, and a decision was made to develop the house as a base for inbound tourism in

cooperation with the village office.

“I want to develop the house as a base for inbound tourism in cooperation with the village, but I do not want the area to become a mass tourism destination. I want to preserve the wonderful nature and culture of Urugi,” says Alex.

The Urugi International Center has been only minimally refurbished as a guest house. Alex is replacing the corrugated iron wall covering outside with wattle and daub, to restore the house to its original beauty. The two-tiered roof design is an architectural style commonly used for sericulture farms in alpine areas where sericulture was once common. The house is designed to allow warm air from the irori hearth to rise through a gap in the ceiling boards of the first floor, providing a comfortable environment for the silkworms, which are susceptible to the cold. Also, the smoke rising from the irori fumigated the space, from the floor and pillars to the entire roof, protecting the silkworms from disease.

After the original landlord of the old house stopped practicing sericulture, a plywood board was stuck over the irori to hide it. However, Alex decided to restore the area to create a place that people could gather around. Working with an architect, local carpenters and young people, Alex replaced the old tatami mats with custom-fitted mats that surround the renovated irori and relaid wooden flooring for the entertaining area. In refurbishing, he used the traditional Japanese method of building without using nails, reproducing the original beauty of the farmhouse.

Alex also actively participates in traditional village events. Every winter, villagers gather at the Kannon-do Hall in the center of the village and take part in the communal chanting of *nenbutsu* sutras, praying for good health and safety every day for forty-eight days. It was the first time for a non-Japanese person to participate in this event, a tradition that has been carried on by villagers for some 260 years.

“The way of life here and the way people feel about this place cannot be understood just by visiting. I think that to know this is the true meaning of international exchange,” says Alex.

Alex hopes that the Urugi International Center will be a place of international exchange that conveys the merits of traditions and their simple beauty that at one time could be found everywhere in Japan. 



A dance troupe performs in the parade
Photo: Courtesy of THE YOSAKOI
SORAN FESTIVAL ORGANIZING
COMMITTEE

Yosakoi Soran Dancing in the Streets

The city of Sapporo on Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido hosts its twenty-eighth annual Yosakoi Soran Matsuri dance festival from June 5 to 9. Thousands of dancers across Japan are now busy fine-tuning their acts.

ROB GILHOOLY

Stamps and shouts reverberate through the school gymnasium in central Sapporo as fifty dancers swoop, swivel and shimmy with breathtaking speed and verve.

The carefully choreographed moves are pleasingly synched with the backing music, which blasts from a boombox and blends bass-heavy backbeats with something more typically traditional.

The dancers, part of the Hiragishi Tenjin troupe, are being put through their paces in preparation for one of Japan's most spectacular dance festivals, an event which attracted 2 million spectators last year, the Yosakoi Soran Matsuri.

The attention to detail is astonishing, with leaders



Hiragishi Tenjin dancers prepare for the Yosakoi Soran Matsuri
Photos: Rob Gilhooly

Left, Shoko Yokoyama of the Yosakoi Soran Matsuri's organizing committee; right, Hiragishi Tenjin leader Takahito Kinoshita
Photos: Rob Gilhooly

interrupting routines for reasons that seem painfully persnickety to the untrained eye.

“We rehearse for about ten hours at weekends and, for those who can get away from work, three hours on weekday evenings,” says leader Takahito Kinoshita, a festival participant since his university days.

“Everyone comes with a shared sense of purpose to create something that’s worthy of showing to festival-goers.”

Come June 5, Kinoshita’s team will be one of 270 from around Japan and overseas that will be dancing in the streets of Sapporo during the festival’s twenty-eighth iteration.

Street bopping festivals are not unusual in Japan, especially during the summer months. Rarely, however, are they as exhilarating as the Sapporo event.

It has its roots in Kochi Prefecture’s sixty-year-old Yosakoi Matsuri. Common to Yosakoi festivals - which have spread to numerous locales over the years - are two rules: Each dancer must hold wooden clappers known as *naruko* - a castanet-like implement traditionally used to scare away birds from fields - and the music must make a nod to folk songs known as *yosakoi bushi* - the eponymous tunes of the original Kochi festival. The backing music of the Sapporo festival must allude to local Hokkaido folk songs called *soran-bushi*.

Sapporo’s version made its way to the Hokkaido capital in 1992 thanks to a university student who had been inspired after seeing the Kochi original, says Shoko Yokoyama of the event’s organizing committee.

“Yosakoi Soran festivals encourage participation and are basically free of restrictions,” Yokoyama explains.

In addition to the high number of participating teams, there are areas where spectators can also strut their stuff during the five-day event, which is performed on streets and stages at nineteen sites throughout the city.

And apart from the two golden rules, participating teams are unshackled by dance genre, or dress code, though many teams dress in the colorful *happi* coats often seen at Japanese summer festivals.



Age is also unlimited: Last year, when 27,000 dancers attended the event, the youngest “dancer” was aged zero while the oldest was 89, Yokoyama says. “The number of team members ranges from several to over one hundred. The main generations making up a team varies. There are teams of mostly juniors, students, working adults or seniors, for example.”

For the 2019 festival, two-thirds of participating teams are from municipalities within Hokkaido, while those from outside Japan’s northernmost main island include three from overseas - from Russia, Taiwan and South Korea.

For some, there’s the additional motivation of a dance contest, which the Hiragishi Tenjin “*hontai*” (main group) has won a record ten times.

“In many ways the team is like any other, with members coming from all walks of life, including schoolteachers, nurses, businesspeople and high school students. A key element to any successful team is its individuality and color,” says Yumiko Murai, the troupe’s director and chairperson of a guild promoting Sapporo’s Hiragishi shopping district, which initiated the troupe in 1993.

“Although the dance theme changes yearly, we feature the *soran-bushi* folk songs quite prominently in our music and ensure the dance is well choreographed to match it. I think this and our trademark ‘wave’ element within the dance are uniquely appealing,” says Murai.

“I first took part in the festival with my mum when I was four and loved the atmosphere immediately,” says team member Ryona Kimura. “I can’t imagine a life without the troupe and this festival. Just hearing the applause from the audience makes all the hours of practice worthwhile.”



SL Moka cuts through the countryside on the Moka Line
Photo: Courtesy of Moka Line

The Moka Railway



Travel by Good Old-fashioned Steam Locomotive

The Moka Line, which runs near the border between Ibaraki and Tochigi Prefectures, is a perfect local railroad for viewing peaceful rural scenery from the windows of a train, stopping along the way to experience traditional craft making or to enjoy the countryside and culture. On weekends and holidays, the SL (steam locomotive) Moka makes the journey even more enjoyable.

OSAMU SAWAJI

The Moka Line is a 41.9-km-long railway linking Shimodate Station in Chikusai City, Ibaraki Prefecture, and Motegi Station in Motegi Town, Tochigi Prefecture. The railway has a long history, having operated along its entire length since 1920. The line is managed and operated by Moka Railway, a third sector corporation financed by public bodies such as Tochigi Prefecture and Moka City chambers of commerce, agricultural cooperatives and banks.

Moka Railway usually operates a one-car train that travels between Shimodate and Motegi Stations on the Moka Line in about one hour and 15 minutes. On weekends and holidays, however, the company also operates the SL Moka, a steam locomotive with three cars. SL Moka, which started operation in 1994, makes one leisurely round trip between Shimodate

Station and Motegi Station, attracting many railway enthusiasts from across the country.

Because the Moka Line, which is a non-electrified line, has no overhead wires or connecting poles, there is nothing to obstruct the field of vision either of passengers inside the train or of trainspotters along the line. The attraction of SL Moka is the enjoyment of seeing how trains looked before railways became electrified. Railroad enthusiasts carrying long-lens cameras gather to take photos along the line.

Ataru Takemae, an employee of the General Affairs Division of Moka Railway, says, “SL Moka reminds us of the age when the steam locomotive was in operation in Japan. Traveling on the line you see cherry and rapeseed blossoms in spring, hydrangea blossoms in the summer and cosmos blossoms in the fall. The train runs through snow-covered scenery in

winter. You can enjoy a relaxing trip in the peaceful atmosphere of a Moka Line train.”

Almost all of the seventeen stations on the Moka Line are small unmanned stations that blend in perfectly with the countryside scenery. But Moka Station, which is the central station of the railway, is unique. The station building, which was rebuilt in 1997, is a four-story structure shaped like a steam locomotive. Its front and sides are designed with large, round glass windows. Just next to Moka Station stands SL 96 Museum, which, just like the station, is shaped like a steam locomotive. SL 96 Museum, which opened in 2013, has an exhibition of trains, including steam locomotives and diesel-powered cars that were in operation in every corner of the country. The steam locomotives of the 9600 Model made in 1920 and the D51 Model made in 1938, which ran in Hokkaido, are preserved in functional condition. The 9600 Model makes compressed air-powered demonstration runs of dozens of meters three times a day on weekends and holidays.

There are many tourist spots along the Moka Line, like the Kubo Memorial Tourism and Culture Exchange Center, which displays valuable historic structures from the Meiji and Taisho periods (1868-1912 and 1912-1926); Moka Igashira Onsen, where you can enjoy an open-air bath; and Michi no eki Motegi, where you can enjoy shopping for fresh vegetables and regional delicacies using local agricultural products.

Mashiko Town, where quality porcelain clay is produced, has developed as the producer of Mashiko ware since the late Edo period (1603-1868), and is a particularly popular stop on the line. Simple and warm Mashiko ware is used mainly for daily-use items like water jars, pots and dishes. There are about 250 potteries and about 50 pottery shops in the town, including many where you can experience pottery-making using a potter’s wheel. In May and November, the Mashiko Pottery Fair is held, and the town comes alive with many visitors. In addition to the usual shops, more than 500 tents line the streets offering many types of pottery to the Fair’s over 600,000 visitors.

If you study local history at Kubo Memorial Tourism and Culture Exchange Center, relax in an open-air



- 1 Moka Station is shaped like a steam locomotive
- 2 The 9600 Model on the short tracks at SL 96 Museum
- 3 Pottery for sale at the Mashiko Pottery Fair

Photos: Satoshi Tanaka

bath at Moka Igashira Onsen, enjoy shopping for souvenirs at Michi no eki Motegi, experience pottery-making in Mashiko and then take a beautiful steam locomotive running with strong billows of white smoke and whistles, you will have enjoyed a trip filled with many of the local attractions. 

Courtesy of HIGASHINE CHERRY



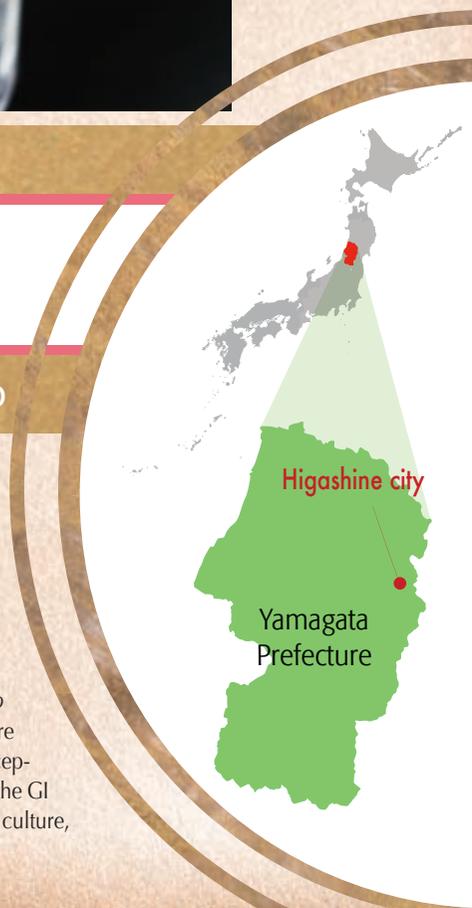
GI JAPAN PRODUCTS



CHERRY

Higashine Sakuranbo

Cherry trees are ubiquitous in Japan and every spring put on flower shows that turn the nation pink. Very few of Japan's many varieties of cherry trees produce edible fruit however, being mostly ornamental. Cherry trees bearing edible fruit are notoriously difficult to cultivate, requiring the specific conditions of low rainfall, plenty of sunshine, soil with excellent drainage and a high temperature difference between day and night. All of these conditions are met in Yamagata Prefecture, which accounts for about 70 percent of the nation's *sakuranbo* (cherry) production. The Sato Nishiki sakuranbo of Higashine in Yamagata are particularly highly prized, being large, perfectly formed, evenly hued and exceptionally well-balanced in terms of sweetness and acidity. Sakuranbo bearing the GI Mark for Higashine have a long harvesting period extended by greenhouse culture, meaning they can be enjoyed, just like the cherry blossoms, all over Japan.



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