

HIGHLIGHTING
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IN PRAISE OF MOUNTAINS

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THEME FOR **AUGUST:**

IN PRAISE OF MOUNTAINS

Japanese people's reverence for the mountains is ancient and continues to be expressed in many ways, through pilgrimages to sacred peaks, hiking, forest bathing and more. In this month's issue of Highlighting Japan, we look at some of the ways in which Japanese people make use of and interact with the mountains.

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ON THE COVER
In Praise of Mountains
Photo: Courtesy of Kamikochi Resort Hotel Association

THE TOKYO 2020 OLYMPIC GAMES “ONE YEAR TO GO!” EVENTS



The Prime Minister delivers an address at the “1 Year to Go!” Ceremony for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

On July 24, 2019, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe attended the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games “1 Year To Go” Celebration and other events held in Tokyo.

The Prime Minister attended the debriefing session on the status report for preparations one year ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, where he delivered an address. Afterwards, he attended the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games “1 Year to Go!” Ceremony for the Games and delivered an address, followed by a photo session.

In his address at the debriefing session, the Prime Minister said:

“There is now just one year to go until the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Six years ago when Tokyo

was chosen to host the Games, I gave an interview in which I said that there are just seven years until the Games begin. Now, six years have passed almost in the blink of an eye. I am delighted to hear that preparations have proceeded extremely smoothly during this period. I would like to reiterate my sincere appreciation to all people involved for their hard work and efforts, including the Tokyo Organizing Committee and Tokyo Metropolitan Government. The Government wishes to make this Games filled with warm thoughts and hopes of the people of Japan, which communicates the reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake to the world and is befitting of a new era, the era of

Reiwa. We will work as one to support these preparations.

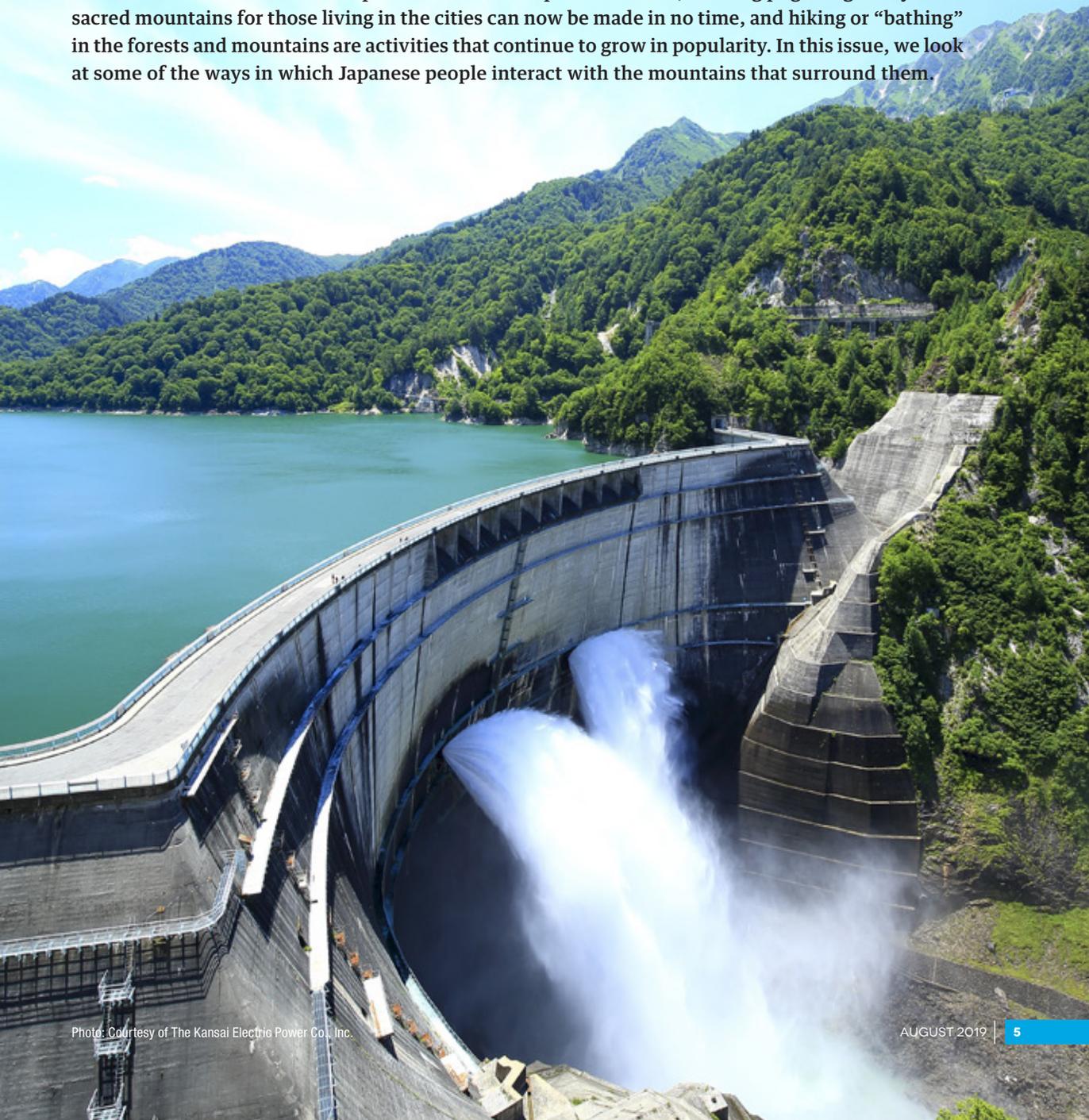
“I would like to exert every effort with all of you, including those who are attending this event from various sectors, over the period of the remaining one year, to make this Games an inspirational all-Japan success.”



The Prime Minister attends the debriefing session on the status report for preparations one year ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

IN PRAISE OF MOUNTAINS

Japan is a country of mountains. More than 70% of the archipelago is covered with mountains big and small. The highest is Mount Fuji, which has an elevation of 3,776 meters, but there are twenty more mountains in Japan higher than 3,000 meters. Volcanic activity is one factor that has led Japanese people to regard the mountains with reverence, even as objects of faith. Another factor is their sheer beauty, most being covered with forests through which clear rivers run and where wild animals roam free. With improvements in transportation links, the long pilgrimages of yore to sacred mountains for those living in the cities can now be made in no time, and hiking or “bathing” in the forests and mountains are activities that continue to grow in popularity. In this issue, we look at some of the ways in which Japanese people interact with the mountains that surround them.



Learning from Nature and Adventure

MITSURO Ohba is an adventurer who has accomplished numerous great feats, such as going down 6,000 km of the Amazon River on a solo raft (1983), walking 1,400 km of the Greenland west coast solo (1985), crossing the Arctic Ocean on foot solo as a world-first (1997), and crossing Antarctica on foot solo (1999). He is currently the president of Earth Academy Mitsuro Ohba Adventure School in his hometown of Mogami Town, Yamagata Prefecture, where he continues to think about the future of the planet and children. We met him there to ask about nature, adventure, and the mountains of his hometown.

What was your upbringing like as a child?

I was born as the eldest son of a farmer in a mountain village rich in nature in Mogami Town in 1953. As a child, I was always playing out in nature whenever I wasn't at school or at home. I'd catch fish and swim in the river, and pick wild plants, mushrooms and chestnuts in the mountains. I felt on top of the world when lying down and sleeping on the dry leaves on the ground. I also loved listening to the calls of all the different birds in the mountains.

In my second year of middle school, I met the falconer Kutsuzawa Asaji, and his way of life had a big impact on me. Mr. Kutsuzawa lived in the neighboring town, growing rice in the summer and hunting rabbits and other animals using a mountain hawk-eagle in the winter. Wild hawk-eagles are extremely fierce and wary, so they're extremely difficult to tame, but Mr. Kutsuzawa

had developed absolute trust with his hawk-eagles. I admired Mr. Kutsuzawa as he lived in harmony with the mountain nature together with this hawk-eagles. It became also my dream to balance farming and falconry in my life.

Why did you decide to become an adventurer?

After graduating from school, I took over the family farming business, but like so many farmers back then, farming alone was rarely enough to make a living, so I went to work in the city during the leisure season. I lived like that for seven years and started wondering why it's not possible to live in Japan on farming alone. That made me want to know about the situation in other countries, so I went on budget trips to Europe and Africa. This made me realize how much fun traveling abroad is. Eventually, I got bored of regular travel, so I started going on adventures into harsh nature, like the Amazon, the Arctic and Antarctica. My family loudly protested against my quitting farming and going on adventures abroad, but I wanted to live according to Kutsuzawa's words that "People have to do what they like. If not, you won't be able to die with a smile on your face."

What did you feel on your adventures to the polar regions of the Arctic and Antarctica?

I strongly felt that humans are part of nature. Meditatively walking in that white land, I felt as if I had blended with nature. In those instances, I was filled with energy and could walk on without getting tired. Of course, there were several times I could have died. Every time that happened, my

Adventurer Mitsuro Ohba at his school with tents, clothing and photographs from his many expeditions



mind was filled with thoughts about my hometown, from the smells of the soil and grass of the fields to the taste of the spring water I drank in the mountains, and I strongly thought “I have to go back there alive.” The adventures taught me the importance of having reverence for nature, humility and gratitude.

What is the aim of Earth Academy Mitsuro Ohba Adventure School that you founded in 2001?

The adventure school offers varied experience programs that include mountain climbing, river rafting, growing vegetables, skiing, building igloos, sleighing and snow camping. Nature makes people notice a variety of things, and so it’s like a teacher. However, especially children today have extremely few opportunities to directly come in contact with nature. I want to help them acquire the wisdom necessary for people to live by providing such opportunities. In fact, all the children enjoy their experiences in nature and go back home filled with energy.

The nature of the mountains around Mogami Town is fantastic. The view from Mount Kamuro with its long ridge is extremely beautiful, and it’s a lot of fun to walk the Natagiritoge trail where a primeval forest of dense beech grows.

Tell us about your dreams for the future.

In the polar regions, I felt the effects of global warming, for example in the receding glaciers. I want more people to feel concerned about global environmental problems, so in 2004, I started a “longitudinal trip around the world,” going from the Arctic through North and South America to Antarctica, and from there up north again via Australia, Japan, and Siberia to the Arctic again. Along this trip, myself and several team members communicate about the natural environment and people’s lives and culture that we investigate on-site. I have so far traveled in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, investigating the atmosphere and snow, and conveying what it’s like in these places to children in Japan, Costa Rica, Germany, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries via satellite phone. This project has unfortunately been suspended for almost ten years, but I’m not giving up and want to continue the trip.

Moreover, I want to keep communicating the wonder and harshness of nature to the children at the adventure school. 📖

Interview by OSAMU SAWAJI

The Power of Forests to Heal the Mind and Body



A Chizu forest therapy guide with a tour party

***Shinrin-yoku* originated in Japan but in recent years has been attracting attention around the world. The mostly forested area of Chizu in Tottori Prefecture runs a *shinrin-yoku* program that offers participants a mind and body healing experience through forests.**

MAO FUJITA

OVER 67% of Japan's land area is covered with forests. These lush forests have provided a variety of benefits, including biodiversity conservation, forest products such as timber and mushrooms, and water purification. More recently, forests have been attracting attention for a rather different function: their positive impact on the human mind and body. *Shinrin-yoku* was first advocated by the Forestry Agency in 1982. In the same year, Japan's first *shinrin-yoku* event was held in Akasawa Natural Recreational Forest in Agematsu, Nagano Prefecture. In verification experiments conducted by the Forestry Agency in the 2000s, spending time in forests was scientifically proven to activate natural killer cells, which are said both to eliminate cancer cells and virus-infected cells, and reduce stress hormones. Volatile compounds called "phytoncides" emitted from trees are

All photos; Courtesy of Chizu Town

said to play a part in this effect.

Based on the findings of these studies, the Forestry Agency developed the Forest Therapy Base scheme to provide facilities where people can experience the preventive medical benefits of *shinrin-yoku* backed up by scientific evidence. In 2006, six forests were designated as forest therapy bases that met conditions such as having more than two Forest Therapy Roads, equipped with benches, toilets and rest stops, as well as offering programs for health promotion and relaxation. Today, sixty-four forests have been recognized under the scheme.

One such forest is that from which the water that nurtures the Tottori Sand Dunes originates in Chizu, Tottori Prefecture, which was designated as a forest therapy base in 2011. Situated some two hours by train from Osaka, Chizu has had a thriving forestry industry since the Edo period (1603-1867), with 93% of its area covered by mixed coniferous forest including cedar and cypress, as well as a wide variety of edible wild plants. The town has a population of over 7,000, and recent years have seen large numbers of people, both men and women of all ages, come here to experience forest therapy.

In 2008, Chizu Town established a Committee of 100 to reflect the voices of its residents in municipal government, in response to the gradual loss of

vitality that accompanied the slump in the domestic forestry industry.

“The idea of shinrin-yoku was proposed when the topic of revitalizing the town using local resources through interaction with residents of urban communities and the younger generation was raised at the Committee of 100. It started out as a forest therapy concept,” says Akihiro Yamanaka of the Chizu Town Hall Rural Regeneration Section.

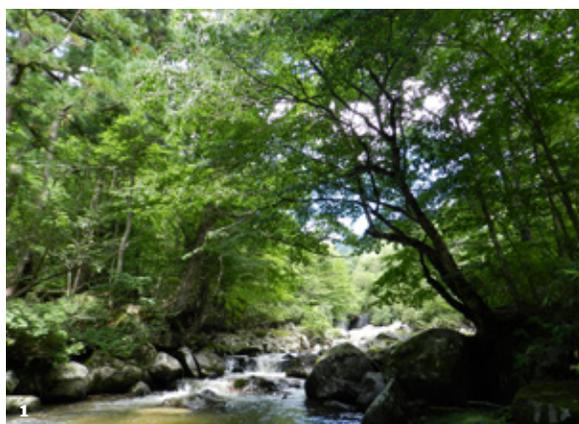
Chizu Town conducted surveys and studies in preparation for the establishment of a forest therapy base, while at the same time fine tuning the planning of tour programs and the design of training courses for forest guides. Forest therapy commenced in 2011, and as of July 2019, there are around eighty Chizu forest therapy guides. However, applications to become Chizu guides are also being received from non-residents of the town.

The Ashizu Valley, a popular Therapy Road in Chizu, is a mixed coniferous forest and boasting one of the best mountain streams in Japan, making it beautiful in all seasons. For that reason, a forest therapy program for corporate training is offered there. The program aims to relieve the pressure and stress experienced by new employees and middle managers through forest therapy.

“We have made an app that measures participants’ emotional balance. We also encourage participants to experience forest therapy in urban parks near their homes before and after the therapy in Chizu. In these ways, participants can appreciate the effects of the forest even when they are not in Chizu. Local inhabitants have told us it was heartening to see participants, many of whom do not look happy at the start of the tour, go home with smiles on their faces after completing the program,” says Chizu Town Hall Rural Regeneration Section Manager Susumu Yamamoto.

Companies that have introduced this training program report psychological improvement, saying that participants appeared more cheerful and became more proactive after the training.

In recent years, shinrin-yoku originating in Japan has attracted attention around the world. In the



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- 1 Spending time in forests reduces stress hormones
- 2 Meditating in the forest. A number of Forest Therapy Bases offer programs for health promotion and relaxation
- 3 Company employees on a forest therapy training program

United States and Europe, books presenting the results of Japanese studies have been published and the concept has received newspaper, television and other media coverage. Perhaps you too might like to try taking a deep breath embraced by a magnificent forest like Chizu? 🌲

Huge Dam Supports Economy and Attracts Tourism

The Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route offers travelers a variety of sightseeing opportunities, from majestic mountain scenery to the towering snow walls of Yuki-no-Otani in spring and the changing foliage of the Chubu-Sangaku National Park year-round. Of all the sights along the route, Kurobe Dam is the highlight.

KUMIKO SATO

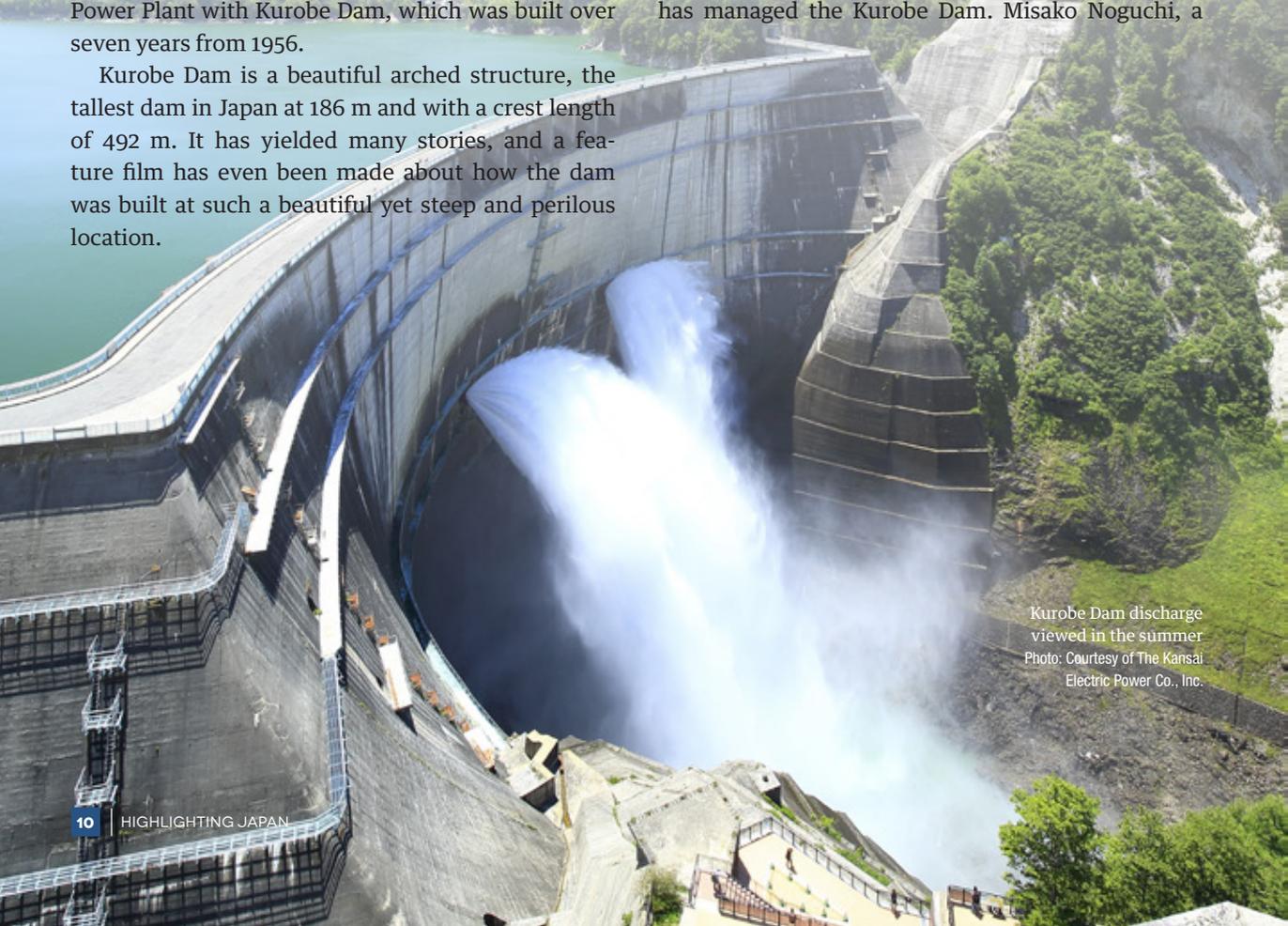
THE Japanese islands are cut through with long, narrow, and steep mountain ranges. During the post-war period of high economic growth, hydroelectric power plants utilizing such steep differences in land elevation were built in various locations for the stable supply of electricity. One such plant was the Kurobe No. 4 Power Plant with Kurobe Dam, which was built over seven years from 1956.

Kurobe Dam is a beautiful arched structure, the tallest dam in Japan at 186 m and with a crest length of 492 m. It has yielded many stories, and a feature film has even been made about how the dam was built at such a beautiful yet steep and perilous location.

Chubu-Sangaku National Park, of which Kurobe Dam forms a part, straddles Niigata, Toyama, Gifu and Nagano Prefectures, and is the location of the Hida Mountains (Northern Alps), which have several peaks of more than 3,000 m. The Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route that runs through the national park is one of the world's most beautiful mountain sightseeing routes, connecting the mountain sightseeing areas of Omachi in Nagano and Tateyama in Toyama. The greatest difference in elevation is 1,975 m. The route can be traversed by switching between bus, cable car and ropeway.

At Kurobe Dam, you can enjoy the impressive discharge of water that comes from the huge dam or hop on the ferry that crosses the dam lake beneath the Tateyama and Ushiro-Tateyama Mountain Ranges. About 1 million tourists come here every year.

Kansai Electric Power Company, Incorporated has managed the Kurobe Dam. Misako Noguchi, a



Kurobe Dam discharge viewed in the summer
Photo: Courtesy of The Kansai Electric Power Co., Inc.



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subsection chief of the Hokuriku Branch Chief Communication Group of the company, says, “After the Second World War, the Kansai area suffered from serious lack of electricity with continuous planned outages at factories and in ordinary homes. To resolve this, the decision was made to develop the upper reaches of the Kurobe River, a project that had not materialized due to the harsh natural environment and technical challenges. The construction of the Kurobe Dam and the Kurobe River No. 4 Hydropower Plant was an unprecedentedly massive project that required the manpower of a total of 10 million man-days and a total construction cost of about 51.3 billion yen at the time (482 million US dollars). The company staked its future on the project.”

Hydropower was the principal source of power in Japan until the 1950s, and the steep Kurobe River with its abundant volumes of water had been flagged as an ideal location for a hydropower plant for some time. However, in that inhospitable gorge covered in snow about five months of the year and rarely visited by humans, just taking measurements meant risking your life.

The development of the Kurobe River’s power resources started in the 1910s, and by 1950, only five power plants had been built downstream of the Kurobe Dam. At this time, the construction materials were carried by the railway line that is now operated as the Kurobe Gorge Railway for sightseeing between Unazuki and Keyakidaira in Toyama. In order to build a large dam in a more remote location further upstream, it was crucial to have a different route for transporting materials and machinery, so work was commenced to dig a tunnel 5.4 km in total length between Omachi in Nagano and the dam location.

Yet after digging to roughly the halfway point of the tunnel, workers ran into a soft stratum (fault fracture zone) from which 660 liters of groundwater

- 1 Yuki-no-Otani snow walls
- 2 A section of the railway line
- 3 At the time of construction and the fault fracture zone

Photos: (1) Courtesy of Tateyama Kurobe Kanko Co., Ltd. (2) Courtesy of Kurobe Gorge Railway Co., Ltd; (3) Courtesy of The Kansai Electric Power Co., Inc.

and sediment gushed forth every second, and this became the biggest challenge of the Kurobe Dam construction project. Construction was extremely difficult, but the latest construction technology of that day was used expertly to get through the approximately 80 m-wide fault fracture zone over the course of seven months. About two years after digging started, the Omachi Tunnel was opened in 1958. In this way, the Kurobe Dam and the Kurobe River No. 4 Hydropower Plant were completed in 1963, greatly contributing to the development of heavy industry, stable living for the people, and post-war reconstruction in the Kansai area.

Noguchi says, “The Kurobe Dam is an important part of society infrastructure, but it is also attractive in terms of sightseeing. Since it’s in the national park, care was taken from the outset of construction to bury power plant facilities underground and otherwise spare the environment.”

The material transportation tunnel is currently a part of the Alpine Route and known as the “Kanden Tunnel.” Since its opening for tourism, a zero-emissions trolleybus had been running for the enjoyment of tourists, but from April this year, it has been replaced by an electric bus.

The maximum output of the Kurobe River No. 4 Hydropower Plant is 335,000 kW, placing it fourth in Japan among general hydropower plants in terms of power generation capacity. Hydropower has the advantage that it can flexibly adapt to changes in electric consumption. Even today, fifty-six years after its construction, Kurobe Dam is not only playing a major role in supporting society but also continues to enchant its visitors. 

Mount Bandai viewed
over Lake Hibara
Photo: Courtesy of Urabandai
Tourism Association

Stories of the Volcano and the People

At Mount Bandai Geopark in Fukushima Prefecture, a collection of “stories” about a volcano explains how nature as a dynamic force connects with people’s everyday lives.

SATOSHI UMEZAWA

THE Aizu region in the western part of Fukushima Prefecture is home to scenic landscapes of lush green mountains, clear flowing rivers, and a variety of lakes and marshes surrounded by forests. Mount Bandai (Bandai-san), an active volcano whose highest peak is 1,816 meters above sea level, has been a symbol of the Aizu region since ancient times.

The Mount Bandai volcano first became active around 700,000 years ago, and tens of thousands of years ago a large-scale collapse occurred at the southwestern side of the mountain, triggering a rock avalanche over a wide area. The shape we see today was formed by an eruption caused by a steam explosion in 1888, resulting in a large-scale collapse of the northern slope. The ensuing rock avalanche flow dammed up the rivers, creating numerous lakes and marshes in the vicinity of Mount Bandai, including Lake Hibara and the Goshiki-numa lakes. Like so

many landscapes of scenic beauty the world over, the scenic landscapes of this area came into being as a result of the dynamic workings of the earth.

The area surrounding Mount Bandai was designated as a Geopark by the Japanese Geoparks Committee in 2011. Geoparks are large areas of land that include many geoheritage sites of geological and topographical significance. Each Japanese Geopark protects and utilizes these sites for educational purposes, as well as conducts geotourism (tourism focusing on geological and topographical ecosystems as well as the region’s history, traditions and culture) with the aim of ensuring the sustainable development of the region. Mount Bandai is one of forty-four Geoparks in Japan.

Makoto Hasuoka of the Mount Bandai Geopark Council Secretariat explains the appeal of Mount Bandai Geopark.

“The sites in Geoparks that show us the origins of the earth are called ‘geosites.’ Mount Bandai Geopark has seventy-three geosites, and we have linked these geosites to five stories to make the features of the



Aka-numa (left), the “Red Pond,” and Ao-numa (right), the “Blue Pond,” in the Goshiki-numa cluster of five colored ponds
 Photos: Courtesy of Urabandai Tourism Association

Geopark easier for visitors to understand.”

The five stories are “The story of the eruption of 1888,” “The story of faith rooted in the foothills of Mount Bandai,” “The story of swamps and wetlands,” “The story of the eruption 50,000 years ago,” and “The story panoramically describing the creation of the earth.” Guidebooks to the area are also available, and by visiting the various geosites associated with the stories, visitors are able to feel the connection between the topography formation and ecosystems, and people’s everyday lives.

Mount Bandai has had both a positive and negative influence on the surrounding area. For example, the Bandai-machi area at the southwest foot of Mount Bandai was not affected by volcanic eruption, and an abundance of agricultural produce using the plentiful underground water has been cultivated there. On the other hand, in Kitashiobara village and some parts of Inawashiro town, debris and blasts from the 1888 eruption resulted in 477 fatalities. Hasuoka expresses a desire to communicate both the positive influence and cruelty of the volcano through the activities of the Geopark.

“In the Nagasaka district of Inawashiro, eighty-six people perished in 1888 when they were swept away by a mud flow. However, the surviving villagers cooperated with each other, working all out to restore the damage. Today, the village is still a close-knit community, carrying on the legacy of their

ancestors. It is our job to share such ‘Stories of the Volcano and the People’ around the region and convey them to those who visit the Geopark.”

Hasuoka feels that the Geopark not only has value for understanding the earth as a living planet through geology and topography, but that it also helps to connect those living in the region.

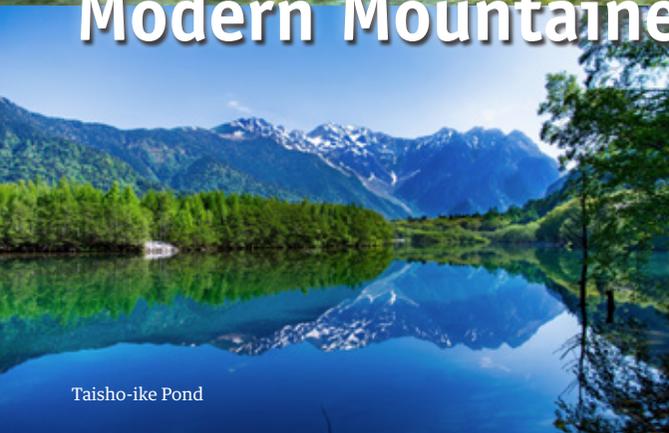
“Traditionally, local governments have been the main players in tourism promotion and the utilization of local resources. Geoparks have the power to connect the dots to create a broader picture. Through the Mount Bandai Geopark, I would like to further enhance the appeal of this region by raising and expanding awareness among local people of their connection with Mount Bandai.”



Makoto Hasuoka of the Mount Bandai Geopark Council Secretariat with a party of schoolchildren
 Photo: Courtesy of Mt.Bandai Geopark Council

The Hotaka mountain range viewed over the Kappa-bashi Bridge and Azusa-gawa River

Kamikochi and the Father of Modern Mountaineering in Japan



Taisho-ike Pond



A camp site in Kamikochi

Englishman Walter Weston introduced the beautiful mountains of Japan to the world while also helping to popularize mountaineering as a form of recreation in Japan. His achievements are praised at Kamikochi in Nagano Prefecture, a mountainous area he loved, and even today, the Weston Memorial Festival is held there each year.

MAO FUJITA

KAMIKOCHI, located in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, is a 1,500 meter high picturesque mountain area that is also designated a national cultural resource as a Special Place of Scenic Beauty and Natural Monuments. There are many popular spots, including the Hotaka mountain range as seen from the Kappa Bridge, which spans the Azusa-gawa River, and Taisho-ike Pond, formed from an eruption of

All photos: Courtesy of Kamikochi Resort Hotel Association

Mt. Yake-dake in 1945 that stopped the flow of the Azusa-gawa River, with over one million people visiting each year. It takes about 1.5 hours to get here by bus from downtown Matsumoto City. Driving into Kamikochi by private automobile has been regulated year-round since 1975 to protect the abundant natural environment of the area.

“You can enjoy the beautiful scenery of the Hotaka mountain range with its lingering snow from the Kappa-bashi Bridge in early summer. The waters of the Azusa-gawa River are cool even in summer, and this is because the melting snow from the Hotaka mountain range flows into the river,” says Itsuo Yonekura, Shinano Section Chair of the Japanese Alpine Club.

Descending from the Kappa-bashi Bridge, one of the symbols of Kamikochi, for about 20 minutes along the righthand side of the transparent Azusa-gawa River, we arrive at the Weston Memorial Square

The relief of Walter Weston



overlooking a beautiful mountain range. There is a relief of Walter Weston (1861-1940) set into the granite stone facing the Square.

Between 1888 and 1915, Weston stayed in Japan three times for extended periods as a missionary, climbing the Japanese Alps - made up of the Hida, the Kiso, and the Akaishi mountain ranges in the Chubu Region of the main island of Japan - Mount Fuji, and many more mountains. The Hida mountain range is also called the Northern Japanese Alps and Kamikochi is a trailhead for mountain climbs here.

Weston published *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps* in 1896 during his three extended stays in Japan, and in this book, he talks about his own personal experiences with mountaineering at Kamikochi, the Hotaka mountain range, Mt. Yarigatake, and other mountains while also introducing the folklore and customs of Japan at the time.

The interactions between Kinjiro Okano, a young mountaineering enthusiast who read this book, and Weston led to the 1905 founding of the Japanese Alpine Club.

“When Weston was climbing the mountains of Kamikochi, mountaineering was considered an activity done for faith and spiritual training in Japan, as well as something done to hunt or otherwise survive. Weston, who was a member of the Alpine Club in England, introduced and spread the idea of mountaineering as a form of leisure or sports for people in the modern day to enjoy,” explains Yonekura.

Ten years after the founding of the Japanese Alpine Club, the idea of mountaineering for fun with a goal of climbing the mountain itself was spreading among Japanese people, and Weston came to be known as “The Father of Modern Mountaineering in Japan.” In 1937, the Japanese government praised his achievements, granting him a decoration, and the Japanese Alpine Club established the Weston

Relief in commemoration of this event. The Weston Memorial Festival is held on the first Saturday and Sunday in June each year at the Weston Memorial Square. First, on Saturday, participants follow the roughly eight-hour mountain path that crosses the Tokugou-toge Pass where Weston once walked. On the following day, local children lay flowers by the Relief at the Weston Memorial Square, and a ceremony is held where poems are read and songs are offered to honor Weston. At the end, all participants remember Weston and observe a moment of silence in his honor.

“The 73rd Weston Memorial Festival was held in June, 2019. We hope that we can continue his achievements and inherit the same magnificent scenery that he saw,” says Kaitaro Furuhashi, Secretary General of the Japanese Alpine Club Shinano Section.

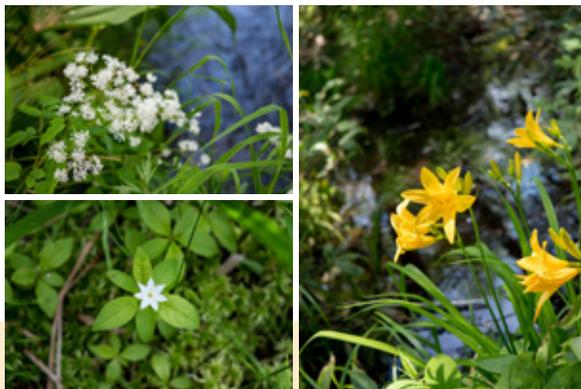
In recent years, more and more people from countries outside Japan have been staying overnight at Kamikochi to enjoy mountain climbing in the Northern Japanese Alps.

“Staying overnight at Kamikochi, surrounded by its magnificent nature, produces a feeling of gratitude towards one’s health and nature itself. I think overnight guests are able to have a special time here that can’t be experienced through just a day trip,” explains Yonekura.

In his book mentioned earlier, Weston writes the following about the sight of the Azusa-gawa River he saw when climbing the summit of Mt. Yake-dake in the Northern Japanese Alps.

Clear streams of water, deliciously fresh, coursed down the slopes to find a common union in the torrent at the bottom of the valley.

These words capture the unchanging beauty of Kamikochi and the surrounding mountains even today. 



Wild flowers in Kamikochi



Yuri Yosumi on a trek in the woods
Photo: Courtesy of Shinichi Yajima/Yuri Yosumi

Enjoying Hiking in the Mountains

Yuri Yosumi writes books, guides and essays about hiking, and as an “outdoor style creator” has helped to popularize hiking in Japan, especially among women. We asked Yosumi about the pleasures of mountain hikes and the beauty of Japanese mountains.

KUMIKO SATO

“I like taking pictures, I like looking at plants, and I like drinking coffee in small mountain huts. I think it’s good that there is something for everyone when it comes to reasons for mountain hiking or ways of enjoying nature,” says so-called outdoor style creator Yuri Yosumi. While producing outdoor clothing and gear for women, Yosumi works to spread the allure of casual trekking in a Japan where the main goal of mountain climbing used to be just reaching the summit.

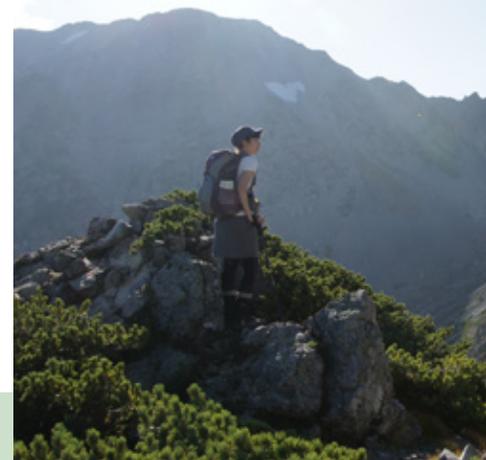
Yosumi came to realize how amazing mountains truly are in 2003, when she visited Kami-kochi in Nagano Prefecture, a

place overflowing with nature. She was moved by the incredible beauty of the grand Hotaka Mountain Range and the emerald green Azusa River. During that trip, she walked about an hour along a flat trekking course, but she came to think that she wanted to go even further along the trail. Yosumi, who wasn’t confident in her own strength and was afraid of heights, little by little gained experience in mountain hiking, and even went trekking in various mountains not just in Japan but in other countries, too.

As she was doing so, she came to a crossroads while trekking in New Zealand in 2004. Trying to decide how to change her clothes

in a mountain hut, she met a European woman who, standing beside her, quickly changed her clothes while still wearing her travel skirt. Yosumi thought that a skirt might solve what she had felt were inconveniences before, so upon returning to Japan, she ordered skirts from an overseas company and did some research. She learned that skirts were also functional, allowing for easy footwork. So she took her idea to a company making outdoor clothing, and in 2009 her Mountain Skirt was

Admiring Mt. Yarigatake from a neighboring mountain ridge
Photo: Courtesy of Yuri Yosumi





With a women's hiking group
Photo: Courtesy of randonnee/Ei-Publishing Co.,Ltd.

commercialized. In Japan, there wasn't really any fashionable outdoor clothing for women, and there weren't any mountain hiking skirts being made. Yosumi's Mountain Skirt allowed women to stay fashionable even while doing outdoor activities, and it immediately became popular with young women. Mountain hiking really took off with young women. Yosumi showed us the cover of a Japanese outdoor magazine that featured photos of her smartly hiking on a mountain while wearing the Mountain Skirt.

Since then, Yosumi has been producing a variety of clothing and other outdoor products. The clothing that she produces is quite colorful. This comes from her distinct sensibilities as she is also an instructor for kimono wearing. Yosumi tells us, "There are rules for kimono based on the changing

seasons, taking the beauty of nature - flowers and landscapes, for example - and expressing it through color-matching and patterns. Japanese mountains have a diverse assortment of flora, and there is a wide variety of color from the fresh greenery and autumn leaves. When you hike in the mountains you can understand why Japanese people have greatly valued a sensibility that admires nature."

Yosumi tells us that the mountain that she felt this the most at was Mt. Daimonji in Kyoto. Mt. Daimonji, famous for ceremonial fires set ablaze to send off ancestral spirits in summer, is a low mountain of only 465 meters in height. You can look out over the city when climbing and get a sense of how Kyoto seems to be protected by the mountains. After descending, you can once again experience the culture of Kyoto that has co-existed with nature in the gardens that use Mt. Daimonji as a backdrop, in the traditional Japanese sweets that resemble seasonal flowers, and more.

Yosumi has climbed quite a few mountains, but she doesn't force herself to take on difficult mountains. "I didn't go to climb Mt. Yarigatake (elevation of 3,180 meters), a mountain that many

hikers dream of climbing, but instead I went to see it. Of course, there are some sights that can only be seen from the summit, but I saw many beautiful sights of Mt. Yarigatake, including the mountain's shadow cast upon a neighboring mountain ridge in the evening, the sight of the mountain reflecting upon a mirror-like pond, and the moon-lit summit," says Yosumi.

Enjoying a leisurely hike
Photo: Courtesy of randonnee/
Ei-Publishing Co.,Ltd.



Ten years have passed since there was a boom in mountain hiking among young women, and it is now becoming deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Many elderly women and men who had given up on mountain hiking due to concerns about physical strength are attending Yosumi's public talks. At these events, she talks about the enjoyment to be had from walking in the mountains in one's own way while leisurely communing with nature. **17**



Regional Revitalization through Gibier

The game meat processed in Kozagawa Town is highly rated by top restaurant chefs

Kozagawa Town in Wakayama Prefecture has successfully launched a new local brand, Kozagawa Gibier, making the most of techniques to process wild game meat that are considered to be some of the best in Japan.

TAKASHI SASAKI

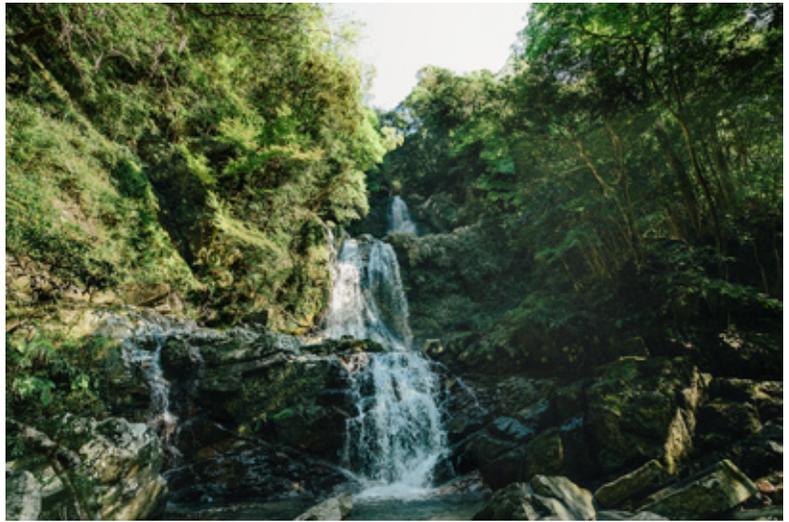
KOZAGAWA Town is located in the south of the Kii Peninsula in Wakayama. While it occupies a large area (294 hectares), the number of residents is small at around 2,500, and approximately 96 percent of the area administered by the town is covered with forests. The meat of wild game hunted in this lush region has been attracting attention in recent years in Japan, where it is known by the French term “gibier.” Takanori Hosoi, who is in charge of the promotion of Kozagawa Gibier at the town office, explains the appeal of the brand, which has turned crop-damaging wild animals into prized regional resources.

Kozagawa Town in Wakayama Prefecture is thickly forested

All photos: Courtesy of Kozagawa Gibier Yama no Hikari Kobo

“According to elderly residents of Kozagawa Town, wild game was once consumed widely here. Some even say ‘meat’ used to mean the meat of wild boars. However, after the emergence of professional butchers, people started to avoid game because wild game meat processed by amateurs smelled raw and unpalatable. Wild animals have caused significant damage to our crops in recent years, and we cannot help but kill around 1,000 deer and 100 wild boars each year in the area administered by the town. However, we only consumed a very small amount of meat taken from those wild animals. The majority of animals were disposed of by burying them in the hills. Experienced hunters in the area started to voice their concerns, saying that they did not want to participate in the taking of life without reason, or that they should only hunt as much as they can consume,” Hosoi says.

The wild animals of Kozagawa Town roam in rich natural surroundings



The circumstances prompted Kozagawa Town to start initiatives to allow them to actively use wild game meat. In 2015, they constructed a new game meat processing facility, Kozagawa Gibier Yama no Hikari Kobo, to start the processing of quality wild game meat under stringent hygiene control.

“Yama no Hikari Kobo is known for several features unseen in other meat processing facilities. The first one is experienced cooks who judge the meat. The second is the freshness of the meat. We only accept wild animals that were killed in the last two hours by hunters who attended classes provided by the



Inside the processing facility

town office. The reason is the deliciousness of wild game meat is greatly influenced by the quality of the cleaning carried out immediately after killing them,” Hosoi says.

They now sell wild game meat under the brand name Kozagawa Seiryujika Kinmomiji. The wild animals grow in a rich natural environment. The exquisite taste of the carefully processed game meat is evaluated highly by chefs, including those who work at Michelin-starred restaurants. In addition, the Satoyama no Gibier Burger, developed by Kozagawa Gibier in collaboration with the popular Pan Kobo Kawa bakery, which operates chain stores in Wakayama and Osaka Prefectures, won the grand prize at the All Japan Regional Burger Grand Prix in 2016, when they took part for the first time. The

initiatives supported by the whole town are evaluated highly, and the town was selected by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries as one of the Game Meat Use Model Districts (seventeen districts across Japan) in March, 2018.

“Winning the grand prize with our Gibier Burger not only made general consumers aware of Kozagawa Gibier, but also changed the awareness of wild game meat significantly among local residents. Kozagawa Gibier now supplies wild game meat to elementary and junior high-schools in the town, and the meat is used as part of school meals. Venison curry is extremely popular. In addition to restaurant, Kozagawa Gibier has released a Kokoro Utareru line of vacuum-sealed game meats, which allows ordinary families to prepare wild game easily at home, and lately has focused on new product development aimed at athletes, since venison is high in protein yet low in fat and is known to have a superior fat burning effect,” Hosoi says.

Wild game, the blessings of nature, is enriching the lives of people in the region and far beyond. 

The prize-winning Satoyama no Gibier Burger. The game meat (gibier) patty is a blend of venison and wild boar





A sixteenth-century Mount Fuji pilgrimage mandala

Mount Fuji, Object of Faith

Mount Fuji is a symbol of Japan and, at 3,776 meters, Japan's highest peak. In 2013, Mount Fuji was afforded World Heritage status as a "cultural" heritage site. The mountain has been depicted in art and literature since ancient times, and holds special meaning for those people who have been drawn to it as an object of faith.

KUMIKO SATO

All photos: Courtesy of Fujisanhongu Sengentaisha

MOUNT Fuji is Japan's highest mountain, a magnificent isolated peak whose foothills gradually descend, on the southern side, into Suruga Bay. Its beautiful conical shape can be seen from far away and from any direction over an area of some 2,800 square kilometers. Mount Fuji features in many poems in the *Man'yōshū*, Japan's oldest collection of poetry, and is the motif of the "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" woodblock print series by Katsushika Hokusai. Moreover, Mount Fuji has come to hold special meaning as an object of faith for the Japanese people since ancient times.

The central tenet of the Mount Fuji faith is the "Sengen Faith" in which Mount Fuji is deified as Asama-no-Okami. Shrines dedicated to the worship of Asama-no-Okami were built mainly on the foothills of Mount Fuji.

Fujisanhongu Sengentaisha, whose main buildings are located at the foot of Mount Fuji in Fujinomiya City, Shizuoka Prefecture, is regarded as the head shrine of the 1,300 Asama (or Sengen) shrines found across Japan.

Yuta Hattori serves as a Shinto priest at the shrine.

"The origins of Sengentaisha are ancient," Hattori explains. "It is said to have been built in the year 27 BCE to appease Mount Fuji, which was active at that time, to prevent it from erupting. The mountain was both valued for its natural bounty, such as the gushing abundance of clean water produced by rain and snow soaking into the lava, and feared on account of its violent eruptions. As a result, people came to feel both awe and respect for Mount Fuji as a mountain where the gods resided."

The main shrine is said to have been built on the site of the present-day parent shrine in 700 CE. Evidence that the religious rite of viewing Mount Fuji from a distance (worship from afar, or *yohai*) was practiced all over the

foothills in the early days can be seen in the excavated ruins in Fujinomiya.

In eighth-century Japan a unique form of religious faith called Shugendo appeared, a fusion of ancient Japanese mountain worship with Buddhism that arrived from the continent. Shugendo entails rigorous ascetic practices in the mountains, with followers seeking enlightenment through the spiritual power that mountains were believed to possess. Mountains that are considered sacred places can be found throughout Japan. Around the eleventh century, eruptions calmed down and Mount Fuji became a sacred place for Shugendo. A temple was built at the summit of the mountain for mountain ascetics to undergo training, and in the fifteenth century ordinary people began going on pilgrimages up the mountain (or *tohai*) led by mountain ascetics. Such group pilgrimages, known as *Fuji-ko*, later came to be organized all over the country, becoming highly popular with the masses in the Edo period (1603-1867). Often, since only village representatives were able to take part in *Fuji-ko* pilgrimages, people who were unable to go to Mount Fuji constructed mounds or miniature replicas known as *Fujizuka* for them to climb locally. *Fujizuka* were even built in distant places from where Mount Fuji was not visible, which tells us just how much the mountain was revered all across Japan.

Even now, when you climb Mount Fuji you may encounter *Fuji-ko* pilgrims, wearing white robes and



The inner shrine at Fujisanhongu Sengentaisha in the foothills of Mount Fuji in Fujinomiya City, Shizuoka Prefecture. The shrine owns numerous buildings and sacred sites extending to the summit

carrying pilgrims' staffs, chanting "*rokkon shojo*" in the manner of the mountain ascetics of old. "*Rokkon*" means the "six roots" of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and awareness, while "*shojo*" means "purification." Through the repeated chanting of "*shojo*" to purify these six roots, the body and mind are cleansed by the spiritual power of the mountain.

"Mount Fuji has not erupted now for over 300 years, but it is still an active volcano. It may not be realistic to expect a volcano of that size to be completely calm, but Asama-no-Okami continues to be



Okumiya shrine at the summit of Mount Fuji at the end of the trail starting from Fujinomiya

worshipped every day at the parent shrine and at the inner shrine at the summit of the mountain," says Hattori.

At the Niiname-no-Matsuri, the most important event of Fujisanhongu Sengentaisha, offerings of vegetables and rice harvested in Fujinomiya are made. In addition, citizens participate in a magnificent event that takes place at the annual shrine festival in November, when floats from the twenty wards of the city compete in the grounds of the shrine. The floats are dedicated to the gods of Mount Fuji, to entertain them, appease their anger and express gratitude for their benevolence.

People today enjoy Mount Fuji in a host of different ways: some take scenic photos of the mountain from afar; others climb the mountain to celebrate the sunrise from its summit; still others use the number 3776 on their car registration plate. The reverence for Mount Fuji glimpsed in these and other activities lives on in the hearts of Japanese people to this day. 🗨️



Rugby Fosters International Interaction

The Rugby World Cup, a quadrennial sports event, will be held in Japan from September to November 2019. Rugby is enabling people to participate in positive international interaction in many parts of the country.

OSAMU SAWAJI

THE Rugby World Cup 2019 will be held in Japan from September to November 2019 under the vision of “Connect Create Go Forward.” Twenty teams, including Japan, will be competing in this World Cup, the first to be held in Asia. The teams are divided into four qualifying pools for the round robin phase of the tournament. The top two teams in each pool will advance to the knock out stage. The tournament begins with the Japan-Russia match at Tokyo Stadium on September 20, with forty-eight matches being held at twelve stadia across the country, until the finals at International Stadium Yokohama on November 2.

The Rugby World Cup provides people with excellent opportunities for international interaction through rugby in many parts of the country. The city of Kitakyushu, Fukuoka, is holding interaction events with Wales, whose national team will be based there during the tournament. In the city of Kitakyushu,

Rugby World Cup 2019 Pools

POOL A	POOL B	POOL C	POOL D
Ireland	New Zealand	England	Australia
Scotland	South Africa	France	Wales
Japan	Italy	Argentina	Georgia
Russia	Namibia	USA	Fiji
Samoa	Canada	Tonga	Uruguay

there used to be a shipping port for coal produced in Kyushu island, and the city developed mining and heavy industry. Based on the historical similarity between Kitakyushu and Cardiff, the capital of Wales, and the fact that the University of Kitakyushu has exchanged students with Cardiff University since 1992, the city campaigned to invite the Welsh national team to set up a training camp. In August 2018 and March 2019, the Welsh Rugby Interaction Program in Kitakyushu was held for five days on each occasion. A total of about twenty people, including the chairman



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- 1 Welsh Rugby Union members parade with local citizens in Kitakyushu
Photo: Courtesy of Kitakyushu City
- 2 Christ's College rugby squad members play a practice game with high school students in Kitakami City
Photo: Courtesy of Kitakami City
- 3 Christ's College rugby squad members experience traditional performing arts at a high school in Kitakami City
Photo: Courtesy of Kitakami City

No Drones!

During the Rugby World Cup 2019 and Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, it is prohibited to fly unmanned aircrafts or drones over the event facilities, including event venues and airports, except for cases prescribed in the applicable law. The Civil Aeronautics Act also prescribes general flight rules on unmanned aircraft or drones such as prohibited airspace for flight and operational limitations.

of the Welsh Rugby Union and ex-players of the Welsh national team, participated in this program to teach rugby to local citizens and to train referees and coaches, and also attended local festivals.

The momentum to support Wales is growing among local citizens. The Welsh love singing so much that the country is known as the “The Land of Songs.” The whole stadium erupts in songs in any home game where the national team competes. Citizens of Kitakyushu will gather to sing Welsh songs at the Welsh national team’s public workout shortly before the World Cup.

Interaction events have been held in many parts of Iwate Prefecture as well. The coastal areas of Iwate were heavily damaged by tsunamis in the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, but the prefecture and the City of Kamaishi jointly bid to host the World Cup and were selected in 2015.

Kitakami City, Iwate, was selected as the camp for the Uruguayan national team that will play matches at Kamaishi Unosumai Memorial Stadium. All of the city’s elementary and junior high school students are making support flags for the Uruguayan national team. Each flag will be about seven meters wide and about one meter tall, to which about 10,000 origami cranes in blue and white, the colors of the Uruguayan national team, will be attached. The blue background of the flags highlights white letters saying “¡Arriba, URUGUAY!” (Go! URUGUAY!) Seven flags will be made and displayed at the practice field.

In addition, Kitakami City is furthering interaction with New Zealand. In May 2017, ex-national team players, including Richard Hugh McCaw, who captained the New Zealand national team to its victory in the 2015 World Cup, participated in rugby events for children at Kitakami Sports Park. In October 2018, twenty rugby squad members from Christ’s College, a New Zealand high school, visited a high school in Kitakami City and played a practice match. 

A Blakiston's fish owl
in Hokkaido
Photo: Courtesy of Wild Bird
Society of Japan

Call Recognition Software to Protect Biodiversity

Call recognition software developed in Japan is contributing to efforts to protect and boost the population of the endangered Blakiston's fish owl and may be applied to other creatures with characteristic sounds in the future.

TAKASHI SASAKI

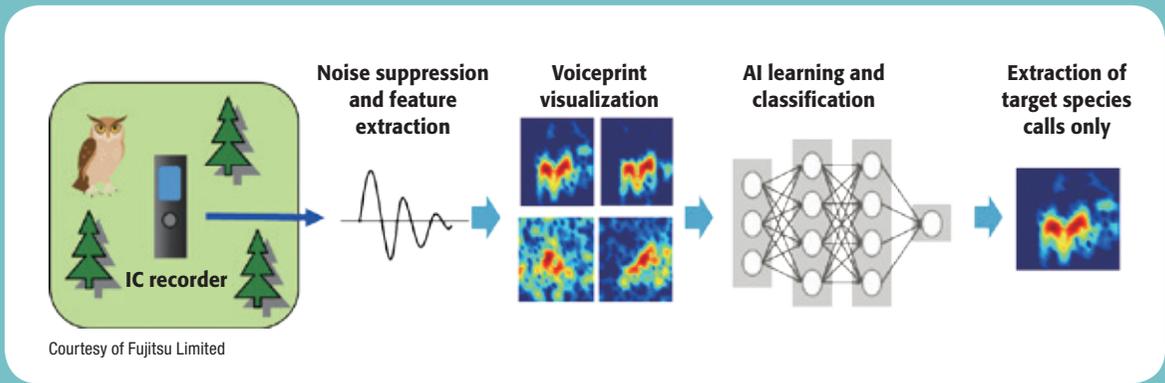
BLAKISTON'S fish owl is the world's largest species of owl, having a wing span of 180 cm. The owl's numbers in Hokkaido, one of the few places the species lives, have decreased in recent years due to factors such as deforestation and a decline in the population of fish on which the owl preys. Blakiston's fish owl has been designated as a "Critically Endangered" species on the Red List of the Ministry of the Environment, indicating it is at extremely high risk of extinction.

A program that extracts the calls of Blakiston's fish owls from recorded sound data with high accuracy has been developed to survey the habitats of this rare bird. Fujitsu Kyushu Network Technologies Limited, a part of the Fujitsu Group, has led the research and development of the program. The Fujitsu Group formulated their "Fujitsu Group Biodiversity Action

Principles" for contributing to biodiversity preservation through information and communications technology (ICT) in 2009, a year prior to the Tenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that was held in Japan. They are engaged in a variety of activities in accordance with these principles.

Mutsumi Saito of Fujitsu Kyushu Network Technologies explains, "One of the activities of the Fujitsu Group has been to support the work of the Wild Bird Society of Japan to protect birds. The program development started when the employees involved with this organization came to discuss the project with my department, which is in charge of sound processing technology for cell phones and smartphones."

In the past, when conducting surveys of Blakiston's fish owl, the Wild Bird Society of Japan would



dispatch people to actually go into the forest at night and check for their calls with their own ears. This method was not only work-intensive, but also came with the risk of encountering brown bears, so about ten years ago, they started to place IC recorders at numerous locations in the owls’ habitats and check the recorded sounds. While this method removed the need to walk in the forest at night, checking the recorded sounds by replaying them took an enormous amount of time and false detections were common. Saito was asked to develop a program that could automate this work.

“In the beginning, we used music editing software to confirm the calls of Blakiston’s fish owls, but it took time and effort,” says Saito. “We then developed original software to visualize the recorded sound

data as voiceprints, and used AI [artificial intelligence] to accurately extract the owls’ calls from several candidates.”

Back then, an enormous number of sound samples was needed to train the AI, so they worked together with the Kushiro City Zoo to record about 5,000 distinct samples of calls, which was then used as learning data. The developed program is not only capable of completing in a few minutes the work that previously took people one hour, but is so accurate that it can even extract faint calls coming from more than 1 km away from the IC recorder.

In 2014, the Wild Bird Society of Japan used this program to conduct a wide-area habitat survey over more than half a year in a timber production forest owned by a paper-making company in Hokkaido. The results proved that the area was frequently used by Blakiston’s fish owls and contributed to better preservation of their habitat as operations and large-scale felling in the area during breeding season are no longer conducted.

Saito says, “If we’re able to collect even more sound data, I’m sure we can expect an even more accurate analysis, which might, for example, allow us to identify individuals and determine where the calls are coming from. Moreover, by adapting the recording technology, it can be used to survey a diverse range of wildlife, such as marine animals, not only birds. In the future, I hope to see this technology used in a variety of fields, such as environmental assessment.”



Mutsumi Saito of Fujitsu Kyushu Network Technologies
Photo: Takashi Sasaki

At the summit of Mount Azumaya on the border of Nagano Prefecture and Gunma Prefecture



Gyalu Lama with his son on their annual father-and-son climb, here at the summit of Mount Tsurugi in Toyama Prefecture

The Mountain Day Ambassador from Nepal

Nepali Gyalu Lama is a former Sherpa on Mount Everest who moved to Nagano Prefecture with its beautiful mountain ranges and now communicates the appeal that mountains hold for alpine guides to people in Japan and overseas.

KUMIKO SATO

GYALU Lama from Nepal lives in Nagano Prefecture and is an experienced alpine guide. Lama was born and raised in the Solukhumbu District in the Himalayan foothills, in a village situated at an altitude of about 3,200 meters. In 1989, at the age of 14, Lama began accompanying teams of mountain climbers as a member of the kitchen staff. In 1992, after gaining experience in the Himalayan Mountains, Lama became a Sirdar (lead guide), and from 1993 acted as a climbing Sherpa, supporting many climbers to reach the

8,000-meter-high summit. In 2000, he led a Japanese climbing team to the summit of Mount Everest.

The opportunity to come to Japan came about through marriage to a Japanese woman who he met when she was traveling in the Himalayas. In 2004, the couple was blessed with a daughter, prompting them to move to Kanagawa Prefecture to be closer to his wife's parental home. Later, the family took up residence in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, which is the sister city of Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. Nagano Prefecture is home to Japan's most famous mountain



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range, the Japan Alps. Lama works as a mountain-climbing guide in the Northern Alps, a part of the Japan Alps that is especially popular with climbers from Japan and overseas. He also helps to maintain the mountains, on commission from Matsumoto City and other authorities, and lectures on the appeal of Japan's mountains in his capacity as a "Mountain Day Ambassador," named after the Mountain Day national holiday on August 11th, which aims to foster an appreciation for the blessings of the mountains.

The most rewarding aspect of Lama's work, he says, is providing mountain-climbing guidance for children. Under Lama's watchful eye as he offers advice such as extending and relaxing the limbs and balancing the body instead of using physical strength, the children rely on maps to navigate their way up the mountain, carrying luggage such as tents and food on their backs. The children experience the rigors of mountain climbing, but when they reach the top, everyone cheers.

"As they climb, I encourage them by telling them that this experience is sure to stand them in good stead when they grow up. Some experiences are tough, while others are amazing. Mountain climbing is like life," says Lama with a smile.

The Himalayas have the highest peaks in the world, with only blue skies and white snow beyond the coniferous forest zone. Japanese mountains, on the other hand, have four seasons, each with its own distinct scenery. Lama says that he was impressed when he first saw mountains in Japan covered with autumn leaves.

"My favorite mountain is Mount Jonen, because you get an uninterrupted 360-degree view of the Northern Alps from its summit. The rice fields in Azumino City that spread out before your eyes near the summit change color completely from season to

- 1 Lama on a Mount Hotakadake trail in the depths of winter
- 2 Lama's climbing skills are called upon for the cutting of tall trees
- 3 Lama with a group of Japanese climbers on Mount Azumaya

season. I never tire of the mountain, no matter how many times I climb it," he says.

Lama is also fascinated by the mountain huts that play an important role in inspecting mountain trails, helping people in distress, and other aspects of mountain safety. "I enjoy Japan's mountain huts because they each have their own unique character depending on the hut's owner. Some places serve delicious food, and some places let you experience ice climbing safely by building a huge ice wall next to the hut. There's also a hut whose owner has a weather forecaster's license and gives you detailed information about the weather," says Lama.

Many guides from Nepal have come for training to learn about the operation and management of these Japanese mountain huts, sewage treatment technology and other aspects. Lama says that one thing he enjoys is hiking with them from time to time.

Currently, Lama is aiming to obtain certification as a mountain guide by the Japan Mountain Guides Association. Japan's mountain trails are well-developed, and recent years have seen an increase in the number of mountain climbers. However, according to Lama, Japanese mountains are often more dangerous than the Himalayas since, while they may not be high, they are steep, the terrain is complex and weather conditions are changeable. Lama would like to gain qualifications in Japan that will enable him to focus even more on activities that ensure the safety of mountain climbers and protect the natural environment of the mountains. 

Eisa

Spirit of Okinawa

Eisa Night dancers



A mixture of dance, song and Obon rites, the folk tradition that is Eisa is an unmissable feature of the Okinawan summer. Eisa is also danced elsewhere in Japan and even overseas, notably Hawaii.

ROB GILHOOLY

PULSATING thumps of *taiko* drums and animated shouts reverberate through Awase fishing port, Okinawa City.

Drummers in turban-like headdress and ornate costume move in unison across the ground, legs lunging and pirouetting, the beats of the drums punctuating their carefully choreographed steps.

Female dancers donning *yukata* glide gracefully in their wake, hands waving delicately.

Among the onlookers are children who mimic the drummers' dynamic moves, thrusting their legs laterally, hands clutching toy drums that they bang with tiny sticks.

They've gathered in Okinawa City to watch an evening of Eisa – a dance that's as representative of Okinawa as *shisa* (lion-dog) gargoyles or bitter *goya* melons.

"Eisa is Okinawa's sound of summer," says one of the onlookers, who has traveled from another part of Okinawa to enjoy "Eisa Night." "We call it *matsuri* (festival), but for Okinawans it's much more than that."

Indeed, while Eisa is an arresting spectacle, bringing together multiple dance teams who take turns strutting their stuff, it's also held to mark a more solemn occasion.

Eisa is pivotal to Obon, the midsummer custom of paying homage to departed ancestors, much like Pithru Paksha for Hindus, or All Souls' Day for Christians.

Obon in Okinawa, where the festival is called "Kyu Bon" (Old Bon), is celebrated on the thirteenth to fifteenth days of the seventh month of the (shorter) lunar calendar. The actual date varies according to the solar calendar, but Kyu Bon typically occurs in August.

The origins of Eisa's eye-catching dance are debated, according to Yuko Higa of the Eisa Museum in Okinawa City.

Scholars have proposed several theories, some suggesting Eisa was an indigenous custom practiced since antiquity. A more widely accepted claim is that it evolved from *nembutsu odori*, a Buddhist folk dance performed to pacify the spirits of the deceased.

Top, Yuko Higa and Airi Toma of the Eisa Museum in Okinawa City; middle, Children dance Eisa beating miniature *shime-daiko* drums; bottom, Eisa costumes unique to different regions of Okinawa

Originally, *nembutsu* chants were spread in Okinawa by a Buddhist monk named Taichu, who visited from his native Fukushima Prefecture, northern Japan, in 1603, staying in Okinawa for three years.

A centuries-old Fukushima tradition known as the Jangara Nembutsu Odori holds similarities to Eisa, adding weight to this view.

It is also postulated that *nembutsu* sect followers known as *nimbucha* were responsible for spreading *nembutsu* chants, or hymns, through funerals and other Buddhist ceremonies they held. As these took root in Okinawa they gradually became a key part of a folk tradition that mixed dance, song and Obon rites.

It became commonplace for performers to dance through their communities during Obon, welcoming home the departed and shouting “hi ya sa sa, hai ya” to keep time as they performed. The addition of a taiko drum or two served to ward off rogue spirits, Higa says.

Whatever theory is correct, Eisa has been a part of Okinawan culture for at least 400 to 500 years, says colleague Airi Toma.

In general, it is traditional for performers to greet their deceased ancestors during the night of the first day of Kyu Bon, before seeing them off on the last day and gathering at the local village hall to dance some more, says Toma who, like Higa, is a former Eisa performer.

“But there are local variations, both in the songs performed and the way they are sung – even the way drumsticks are wielded,” Toma says.

In more recent years, Eisa has undergone significant changes.

Following the end of World War II, Eisa in Okinawa City was turned into an officially organized annual contest, the Zento Eisa Konkuru (now the Okinawa Zento Eisa Matsuri), into which local youth associations entered teams of dancers that vied for prizes.

The competitive element naturally led to more elaborate costumes and performances, with dynamism boosted by an increase in taiko drums – from the large *odaiko* to the smaller *shimedaiko* – alongside the traditional three-stringed *sanshin*, a castanet-like bamboo instrument called the *yotsutake*,



and *kaneuchi* gongs, she says.

The competitive element has since been abandoned, though the costumes and instruments remain.

This year, many Eisa teams, some comprising fifty or more members, will take part in the sixty-fourth Zento Eisa Festival, to be held in August.

“I fell in love with Eisa when I was about three and used to try and mimic the dances,” says one dancer, 19, who performed at July’s Eisa Night. “It took about two years to get to a standard where I could take part in events like this. But I love the vitality and the camaraderie.”

Another dancer, also 19, says he also feels a sense of pride and achievement. “It’s harder than it might look, especially in this heat, but it’s worth it. I want to help ensure the tradition continues.”

The Nagara tourist train crosses the Nagara River
Photo: Courtesy of Nagaragawa Railway

Nagaragawa
Railroad



A Railway Hugging a Beautiful Clear River

Using the Nagaragawa Railway in Gifu Prefecture, you can enjoy uninterrupted views of the Nagara River, one of the most beautiful rivers in Japan. You can take a long, luxurious ride on a tourist train, or disembark along the line to explore a region with a long history and many folk crafts and traditions.

OSAMU SAWAJI

THE Nagara River, one of the so-called Three Clear-flowing Rivers in Japan, has its headwaters in the mountains of the northern region of Gifu Prefecture, located nearly in the center of Honshu, the main island of Japan. The river runs across the prefecture vertically, flowing through neighboring Mie Prefecture and into the Pacific Ocean. The Nagaragawa Railway, which winds alongside and criss-crosses the Nagara River, is a 72.1-km long rail line, connecting Mino-ota Station in Minokamo City with Hokuno Station in Gujo City.

“More than anything else, the most charming part of the Nagaragawa Railway is the Nagara River, which the railway hugs along much of the line’s length. The line is run by diesel-powered trains, so there are no electrical wires or poles. The views from the train car windows are uninterrupted, and the sight of the one- or two-car trains running along the line fits in very well with the surrounding scenery,” explains the

railway’s chief attendant, Yuka Funato.

The “Nagara” tourist train allows its passengers to thoroughly enjoy their ride along the Nagaragawa Railway. The Nagara train was designed by Eiji Mitooka, who has worked on the designs of many trains, including the 800 series Kyushu Shinkansen high speed train. The Nagara train cars are a brilliant royal red color, and the chic, Japanese-style interior features decorations made with abundant amounts of local materials.



Furnishings inside the Nagara tourist train
Photo: Satoshi Tanaka

The tables, chairs, and more are made mainly from Tono cypress wood, produced in the eastern part of the prefecture. The windows also feature cypress frames to allow guests to view the scenery from the windows as if it were a picture, and Gujo indigo-dyed curtains dyed in Gujo City hang near the train doors.

The Nagara mainly runs on Fridays, weekends, public holidays, and during the summer vacation season, running one round trip per day. You can purchase a ticket that includes lunch, giving you the chance to enjoy a meal using local ingredients, including Hida beef, Oku-Mino Kojidori chicken, and sweetfish.

“People who enjoy rafting or canoeing along the Nagara River often wave their hands or oars at the train as it passes. You could say that this kind of interaction with people is a kind of joy that is unique to the Nagaragawa Railway,” says Funado.

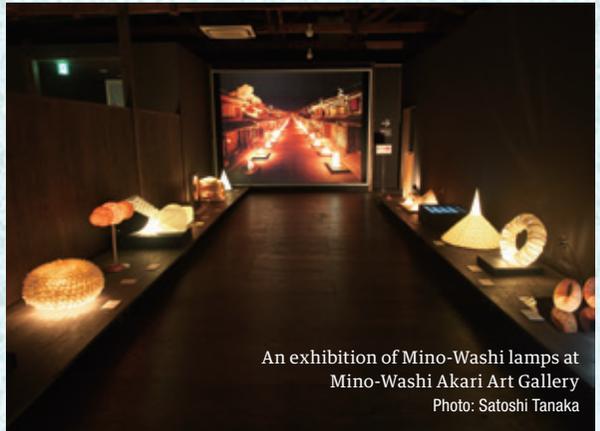
There are many tourist spots along the Nagaragawa Railway line, too. Seki City, where Seki Station is located, is known as an area of production for cutlery with an over 800-year history. Seki cutlery production began with Japanese swords, and later expanded to a wide variety of products, including kitchen and table knives, scissors, and more. The Gifu Cutlery Hall, near Hamonokaikanmae Station, offers approximately 2,500 items for sale, including kitchen and table knives and other kitchen goods, in addition to displaying cutlery products produced in Seki. At the Seki Sword Tradition Museum, Japanese swords and custom-made knives are on display, and demonstrations of traditional Japanese sword forging are also given.

Mino City, home of Minoshi Station, is famous as a production area for Mino Washi paper, boasting a history of 1,300 years. In the city, houses built between the Edo period (1603-1867) and the Meiji period (1868-1912) line the streets, making up an area known as the Udatsu-lined Old Streets, designated as one of the National Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings. “Udatsu” are walls constructed at both ends of the roof of a large house that were originally designed to prevent fires from spreading. Over time, merchants incorporated artistic elements into the udatsu as symbols of their wealth.

Since 1994, the Mino-Washi Akari Exhibition has



A section of Udatsu-lined Old Streets
Photo: Satoshi Tanaka



An exhibition of Mino-Washi lamps at
Mino-Washi Akari Art Gallery
Photo: Satoshi Tanaka

been held every year in the middle of October at the Udatsu-lined Old Streets (October 12-13 this year). At this art exhibition, approximately 500 artistic lamps made using Mino Washi paper are on display, submitted by artists from all over Japan, enveloping the town in a dreamlike atmosphere. At the Mino-Washi Akari Art Gallery, approximately eighty pieces are on display from among the lamps selected as excellent works of art.

“These works of art, made with a variety of techniques such as layering and folding of the paper, realize the huge potential inherent in washi paper,” says Hidetaka Furukawa, head of the Mino-Washi Akari Art Gallery.

In Gujo City, where Gujo-Hachiman Station is located, the *Gujo Odori* dances are held from July to September each year, a tradition that has continued for over 400 years. The platform of Minami-Kodakara-Onsen Station, also in Gujo, is itself the entrance to a hot spring facility, so you can soak in the hot springs right after getting off the train.

Riding the Nagaragawa Railway is an opportunity to look out at the clear waters of the Nagara River and abundant natural beauty while taking in the region’s rich history and culture along the way. 



Courtesy of MIWASOMEN COOPERATIVE

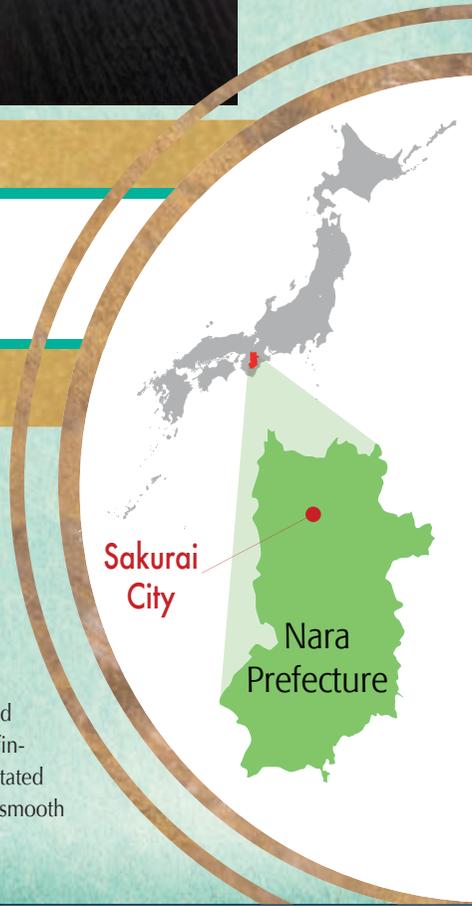


GI JAPAN PRODUCTS

SOMEN

Miwa Somen

Somen are very thin noodles that are typically served cold with a dipping sauce in the summer. Somen are said to have been made first in Miwa, a district of Sakurai City in Nara Prefecture, some 1,300 years ago, and traditional methods for the noodles' production are still used in Miwa today. A dough of wheat flour, salt and local spring water is kneaded for 30 minutes then pressed into thick strips, drawn out by hand to form long coiled rolls, then drawn out again using a machine to further thin the elastic dough. The noodles are hung from racks to dry, then cut and bundled. Miwa Somen noodles are graded according to thickness, with the finest having over 95 strands in every 10-gram bundle. Mechanization has facilitated the commercialization of Miwa Somen without compromising the noodles' smooth but firm texture or delicate flavor.



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