

Wisdom of the Snow Country

JAPAN'S heavy snowfall areas are located mainly in Hokkaido and some regions facing the Sea of Japan. The heavy snowfalls have had a significant impact on the local areas. These areas are known for their uniquely developed snow country wisdom and distinctive cultures. Based in Yuzawa Town, Niigata Prefecture, one of these heavy snowfall areas and the place where *Snow Country*, a novel by Kawabata Yasunari, is set, Iguchi Tomohiro promotes tourism as the representative director of the Snow Country Tourism Zone. We asked him about the wisdom and culture that are nurtured by the people who live in snow country.

What are the regional characteristics of the Snow Country Tourism Zone, which covers seven cities and towns in Niigata, Nagano and Gunma Prefectures, including Yuzawa Town?

The area is located on the same latitude as cities known for mild weather, such as San Francisco, Athens and Lisbon. However, it is one of the world's most famous heavy snowfall areas, with potentially up to three meters of snow falling there every winter. Clouds made from moist air sustained by the warm currents of the Sea of Japan are blown by the Siberian wind. When these clouds hit mountains more than 2,000 meters high in the area, they are forced upward and fall in the form of heavy snow. We have a lot of snow, and it piles up because it is fluffy and contains a lot of moisture. Although this is an area with heavy snowfall, people began living here permanently in the Jomon period, which was approximately 8,000 years ago. *Kaengatadoki* earthenware excavated in Niigata Prefecture, which is characterized by its blaring fire-like form, is ancestral evidence that people lived here as far back as the Jomon period.

The area is covered with snow from December until March of the following year. Despite this, people have been living here for generations because snow has many benefits.

What benefits does snow have?

Snow that has accumulated on the mountains melts and produces a large amount of water in spring. Due to its rich water resources, this area is known as one of Japan's largest rice producing zones. Sake brewed from clear water and locally produced rice is another major industry.

In addition, to make it through the snowbound winters, the local people have developed a variety of preserved food using vegetables picked in spring through autumn as the ingredients. For example, salted and fermented *nozawana* vegetable leaves are typical pickles offered as winter cuisine. Another food is *nina*, or *nozawana* vegetable pickles boiled with soy sauce, which is added to adjust the flavor because the acidity increases during the fermentation process. *Nina* is one of the "soul foods" of this area. Likewise, people make rice flour with harvested rice that is unsaleable due to the grains being too small or having cracks. *Anbo* (called *oyaki* in some areas) is preserved food steamed with *nozawana* pickles or sweet bean paste wrapped in a skin made of rice flour mixed with water. This cuisine shows the ingenuity of people who worked on preserving foods because deliveries were not carried out during winter.

People stored preserved fish, vegetables and other foods in *yukimuro*, or snow cabins, before they started to use refrigerators. Foods can be kept fresh in *yukimuro* because the internal temperature remains consistent regardless of changes in the external temperature. In recent years, there

Iguchi Tomohiro, representative director of the Snow Country Tourism Zone, at an inn he runs in Minamiuonuma City, Niigata Prefecture



has been growing interest in yukimuro because of their capability of improving the flavor of ingredients, in addition to their low environmental load. The internal state of yukimuro, which is characterized by low temperatures and high humidity, increases the sweetness of vegetables and rice through the saccharification of starches contained in these foods. A variety of products including vegetables, sake and meat aged in yukimuro are available in the market.

Does the snow country have a unique culture?

The textile-related culture has been passed down for many years. A typical example is *echigo-jofu*, which was inscribed as UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. Echigo-jofu refers to hemp-based fabric produced in the Echigo area whose history dates back more than 1,200 years. It was produced by female members of local farming families during winter, which is the agricultural off-season. The fabric, which was used mainly for kimono that people wore during summer, was so highly rated nationwide that it became an important product and supported the region financially during the Edo period (1603-1867). It is crafted through as many as fifty processes, requiring an overwhelming workload. The long winter season enabled people to spend the great amount of effort and time necessary to make echigo-jofu. The final process is *yukisarashi*, the process of placing the unfolded fabric on the snow to bleach it. It is carried out in March and is known as a typical early spring activity.

People also developed the culture of helping each other to overcome the tough winter environment. For example, *yui*, a mutual support activity, is carried out in each community. People cooperate with each other in a variety of work such as removing the snow that has accumulated on the rooftops and stomping on snow piled up on the streets to improve walkability.

What type of tourism do you recommend for winter?

Skiing is the most popular activity. We have numerous ski areas, and those in the Snow Country Tourism Zone attract approximately 10 million people every year. In addition, we have hot springs in many locations. Taking a hot spring bath while enjoying a beautiful snowy landscape is an exceptional experience.

The Snow Country Tourism Zone offers a variety of other programs to ensure that people can enjoy the nature and culture of snowy areas, such as learning the recipes of local winter dishes at old Japanese-style houses, walking on snow in snowshoes, and enjoying food cooked with locally produced ingredients in snow huts.

You can also have an enjoyable time doing nothing but relaxing. I like winter mornings in particular. I feel peace of mind from the bottom of my heart when I take a walk in a mystical landscape veiled by a snowy morning mist or drink coffee in a room while looking quietly through the window at the snow-covered landscape outside.

It takes only 70 minutes by Shinkansen from Tokyo to the locations in the Snow Country Tourism Zone. Recently, the number of foreign tourists, mainly skiers, has been increasing. Looking ahead, we will step up our efforts to ensure that people have more opportunities to experience the nature and culture that are unique to the snow country. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
