

Listen, the Snow Is Falling

Shirakawa-go, a remote mountain village in Gifu Prefecture, is at its most picturesque in winter.

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All photos: Courtesy of Shirakawa Village



Roof thatch is replaced in a mutual assistance practice known as *yui*



View over the hearth in a *gassho-zukuri* house

SHIRAKAWA-GO in Shirakawa Village, Gifu Prefecture, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, is known for its *gassho-zukuri* wooden houses, which were built from 100 to 300 years ago and are characterized by their steep thatched roofs. Ogi-machi in Shirakawa-go, where fifty-nine of the houses are located, is a peaceful, pastoral landscape from spring to fall. In winter, the town is completely covered with snow.

According to Tezuka Yuki of the Shirakawa-go Tourist Association, “The snowfall in the area varies from year to year. We have 1.5 meters of snow even in years when we have a relatively small amount of snow, and we have two to three meters of snow in years when the snowfall is heavy.”

Gassho-zukuri houses in Shirakawa-go are designed with steeper roofs than thatched houses in other regions to reduce the burden of removing snow from the roofs so that they do not buckle under its heavy weight. Gassho-zukuri houses are made (*zukuri*) by strapping logs together in a triangular formation and are said to resemble “hands put together in prayer” (*gassho*).

In Shirakawa-go, which is situated in a remote mountainous area and is covered with snow in winter, people had only a limited amount of arable land and farming time. This is why silk production was an important industry that supported the villagers’ livelihoods. Up until before World War II, cocoon cultivation flourished using the large spaces in the attics of gassho-zukuri houses.

Because the roof thatch sometimes slips to the ground under the weight of snow, local people carry out repairs as circumstances demand – about once every thirty years – coming together to replace the thatch of a house in a mutual assistance practice

known as *yui*. Sometimes the work requires the assistance of skilled workers.

“All the local people from the elderly to the young participate in *yui*. This is how we have passed on the skills from generation to generation to preserve our gassho-zukuri houses,” says Tezuka.

About forty years ago the only national road leading to the region was blocked by a heavy snowfall, which left the village isolated. Since then, the road networks have been improved and snow can be cleared from the roads leading to the village, so there is relatively easy access to the region, even in winter.

“We now receive nearly 1.8 million tourists annually. About 800,000 of these tourists are foreigners. Among others, those from countries where no snow falls are extremely impressed by the snowy landscape of Shirakawa-go,” says Tezuka.

In Ogi-machi, illumination events are held on a number of nights during the period when snow falls, creating a magical atmosphere. (Reservations are required. More information is available on the website of the Shirakawa-go Tourist Association.) In Ogi-machi, around twenty houses are converted to guest houses in winter. Here guests can enjoy the lifestyle passed down from generation to generation and, at night, listen to the silence of the snow falling outside.

“In Shirakawa Village, there are many places to enjoy winter other than Ogi-machi. In Hirase Hot Springs Village near Shirakawa-go, for example, visitors can take an open-air bath in the snowy scenery. And at Toyota Shirakawa-Go Eco-Institute, a ten-minute drive from Shirakawa-go, a wide variety of snow activities can be enjoyed, including snowshoe walking in the forest. I hope that visitors to Shirakawa-go will take in these places as well and enjoy unique winter experiences,” says Tezuka. **U**