



Shirakawa-go in winter, illuminated at night

The Magical Snowscape of Shirakawa-go

Shirakawa-go in winter becomes a magical site when its village of traditional homes built in the unique architectural style of *gassho-zukuri* is blanketed in white snow.

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SHIRAKAWA-GO in Shirakawa Village, northwest Gifu Prefecture, located in the center of Japan's main island of Honshu, is known for its thatched-roofed *gassho-zukuri*ⁱ houses. The *gassho-zukuri* architectural style is characterized by roofs with a triangular formation resembling hands joined in prayer, or *gassho* in Japanese, designed to withstand heavy snowfall. Hailed as an example of an original Japanese landscape that remains intact to this day as a blend of traditional rural culture and lifestyle, Shirakawa-go was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, along with Gokayama in neighboring Toyama Prefecture. Shirakawa-go is surrounded by steep mountains, and snow falls each year from late December.

"We can get more than two meters of snow in Shirakawa-go

when snowfall is heavy. In winter, daytime temperatures average -1 to 0 degrees Celsius, 2 to 3 degrees Celsius at the most. The nights are bitterly cold, with sub-zero temperatures," says Hashiwaki Kei of the Tourism Promotion Division of the Shirakawa Village Office.

From spring through fall, visitors to Shirakawa-go enjoy taking photos of the tranquil rural landscape and the "upside-down *gassho-zukuri* houses" reflected on the surface of the water of the rice paddies. Come winter, when the snow begins to fall, the scenery is suddenly transformed into a snow covered landscape. The *gassho-zukuri* houses dotted about this silvery white landscape are an iconic winter scene in Shirakawa-go.

At dusk in particular, as the snow cover gradually takes on a more intense blue hue, the lights start to come on in the houses, the *shoji*ⁱⁱ paper screen windows distributing a dim light and creating a magical spectacle unique to the snow country. On certain nights only in winter, light-up events are held, turning the village into a dreamlike world. This beautiful winter landscape is unique to Shirakawa-goⁱⁱⁱ.



Gassho-zukuri houses in winter in daytime

Says Hashiwaki, “I heard that the illumination event grew out of the desire of the local residents to extend *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) to visitors by offering them an enjoyable experience to take home with them during the winter season of monotonous snow-covered scenes. Many people look forward to it every year,” says Hashiwaki.

Before the spread of COVID-19, Shirakawa-go welcomed many tourists from Asia, Europe and the United States. From the observatory overlooking Shirakawa-go, they could enjoy a vast panoramic view of the village blanketed in snow and illuminated by lights. One tourist from overseas marveled that it resembles a world depicted in a picture book of folk tales from their childhood.

Winter, more than any other season, imbues the Shirakawa-go landscape with a magical air of wonder and nostalgia that stays with everyone who visits. ¹

i A residential architectural style in which thatched roofs are constructed in a triangular formation, giving the appearance of two hands joined in prayer. (The term “thatch” is the general name given to grasses used to thatch roofs, and includes materials such as Japanese pampas grass and reeds.)
 ii *Shoji* are lightweight sliding doors, windows or room dividers consisting of thick, translucent paper stretched over a framed lattice of wood or bamboo.
 iii The Shirakawa-go Gassho-Zukuri village is illuminated on certain days in January and February. Entrance is only by advance reservation. For more information, please check the Shirakawa-go Tourist Association website.

A gassho-zukuri house reflected on a rice paddy on a winter's night

