

TRAVEL STORIES ON GUNMA, NIIGATA & NAGANO

GUNMA

by Jeffrey Budryk

Maebashi and Mt. Akagi: The Heart of Gunma

Maebashi, the capital city of Gunma Prefecture, styles itself the city of water, greenery, and poetry. Pick up a bilingual map of the area at the tourist information center inside JR Maebashi Station.

A small onsen awaits weary travelers just 200m from the north exit of the station along tree lined Zelkova Boulevard. For newcomers to Japan, an onsen is a natural hot spring bath. Gunma in particular is famous for its onsens, so don't miss trying a few during your stay. After mandatory shoe removal, pay the admission fee, disrobe in the appropriate changing room, and enter the bathing area. Please wash or at least rinse your body before entering the bath. It is customary to bring along a small towel to be used as a wash cloth. Keep this towel out of the bath itself. Locals sometimes place their towels on their heads while bathing.

After freshening up at the onsen, continue north along Zelkova Boulevard to Chuo Maebashi Station (Terminal for the Nishi Kiryu bound Jomo Electric Line) and the Hirose Stream. In winter the area along the banks of the stream is illuminated for the holidays. Turn left and walk along the stream towards the Maebashi City Museum of Literature. The museum's permanent exhibition is devoted primarily to Maebashi native Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942), one of Japan's most celebrated poets. Sakutarō's manuscripts and personal items are on display. Be sure to ask for an English language brochure at the admission counter. Across the river from the museum is a shop named "Hirose Stream" specializing in traditional local souvenirs ranging from folk crafts to rice wine.



Statue of Sakutarō HAGIWARA overlooking the Hirose Stream-Maebashi City

Continue west along the Hirose Stream for about 400m, turn left (south) on to busy Route 17, then right (west again) on to the Maebashi-Omama-Kiryu Road for about 300m towards Central Amusement Park, located in the northern tip of Maebashi Park. Head southwest under the Chuo Bridge into the main park area where Sachi Pond is situated. In late March and early April the park

is full of visitors enjoying the cherry blossoms in full bloom. Flower enthusiasts might also want to hop on a bus from a Route 17 stop to Shikishima Park on the bank of the Tone River. In addition to numerous cherry blossoms, Shikishima Park boasts an impressive rose garden.

Towering over the south side of Maebashi Park is the Gunma Prefectural Office. The earthen wall covered with knotted evergreens on the north side of the complex is a remnant of the original samurai castle that once stood on the present day site of the office complex. The 32nd floor observation deck offers a spectacular view of Gunma Prefecture, and there are two excellent restaurants offering similar views on the 31st floor. Of particular interest is the giant floor relief map of Gunma on the 26th floor Fureai Terrace.

Visible from the north window of the 32nd floor observation deck is majestic Mt. Akagi. At 1828 meters Akagi is the highest of the Jomo Sanzan (“Three Mountains of Gunma,” well-known and beloved by the locals), the other two being Mt. Haruna (1449m) and Mt. Myogi (1104m). For a closer look at Akagi, take a bus from JR Maebashi Station bound for Fujimi Onsen. The name “Fujimi” literally means “See Mt. Fuji,” and on a very clear day the summit of Japan’s tallest mountain is indeed visible from the onsen. Buses leave roughly four times a day from Fujimi Onsen to Lake Onuma, one of the crater lakes of Akagi. In the summer a trip to Akagi’s Onuma is a great way to escape the heat. Enjoy hiking and water sports amid the fantastic scenery. Winter brings ice fishermen to the frozen surface of the lake. Akagi Shrine on the edge of the water offers a wonderful view of Onuma and the surrounding peaks.



Mt. Akagi viewed from Gunma Prefectural Office-Maebashi City



Lake Onuma viewed from Akagi Shrine – Fujimi Village

Greater Kiryu and the Watarase River: Fun for the Whole Family

The Jomo Electric Line connects Chuo Maebashi Station with Nishi Kiryu Station. Board a Nishi Kiryu bound train and get off at Niisato Station (the trip takes about 30 minutes). From Niisato Station get on a bus heading to Caribbean Beach. Caribbean Beach is an indoor heated water park utilizing exhaust heat energy from the nearby Greater Kiryu Sanitation Center. The two

level facility contains a wave pool simulating beach shore conditions, a 150 meter long circulating “river”, several water slides, a pool for small children, and even a competition pool for serious swimmers. Caribbean Beach is an ideal place for families with children.



Caribbean Beach – Niisato Village

The city of Kiryu is famous for its historic textile industry and is accessible not only by the Jomo Electric Line, but by the Watarase Keikoku Line, Tobu Line, and JR Ryomo Line. Located about 400m south of the Jomo Electric Line’s Tennojuku Station is the Kiryu Meijikan. Built in 1878 as the prefectural hygiene center, Meijikan has been designated as an Important National Cultural Property representing the western style of architecture prevalent during Japan’s Meiji Period (1868-1912).

From Nishi Kiryu Station, head 300m north up an incredibly steep hill to the Okawa Museum of Art. Named for collector Eiji Okawa, the museum showcases paintings by Japanese masters in modern western style such as Shunsuke Matsumoto (1912-1948) and Hideo Noda (1908-1939). Located about 700m northeast is the Kiryugaoka Amusement Park and Zoo, both popular with children.

No trip to Kiryu would be complete without a visit to the “Yukari” Textile Museum, which is situated one kilometer east of Jomo Electric Line Nishi Kiryu Station. Visitors to the museum are encouraged to experience traditional Japanese weaving and dyeing firsthand. Virtually all of the souvenirs available at the museum shop are handmade.



Kiryu Meijikan – Kiryu City



**Weaving at “Yukari” Textile
Museum-Kiryu City**

North of Kiryu City along the Watarase River is scenic Azuma Village. There are actually three villages named Azuma in Gunma, the one north of Kiryu is known as “Seta-gun” Azuma. Take the Watarase Keikoku Line from JR Kiryu Station to Konaka Station. Hiking fans should try the 7.4 kilometer trek up the mountain to Konaka Otaki, a spectacular waterfall.

Take a bus from Godo Station to the Tomihiro Museum of Poetry and Illustration. The museum is dedicated to the works of Azuma native Tomohiro Hoshino. Formerly a junior high school physical education teacher, Mr. Hoshino was paralyzed from the neck down due to an injury sustained in an accident while coaching the school gymnastics team. During his long stay in the hospital, Mr. Hoshino began writing and drawing pictures by holding a brush in his mouth. His exquisite watercolors and simple verses are both moving and inspiring.

Oigami Onsen and Beyond: A Drive Through the Mountains

Although Gunma’s Katashina River Valley is accessible by bus, tourists with international driving permits might want to consider renting a car to see the area’s many attractions. From the Numata exit off of the Kanetsu Expressway, take Route 120 east for five kilometers to Shirasawa Village. While in Shirasawa, be sure to try Homuraan’s yakimanju. Yakimanju, hot skewered rolls coated and grilled in a sweet sauce, is a Gunma specialty and tastes great at any time of the year. 400m southeast of Homuraan is one of Japan’s elaborate Michi No Eki’s, or roadside rest areas. Shirasawa’s Michi No Eki has a farmer’s market and an onsen (Bokyo No Yu) overlooking the beautiful Katashina River.



Yakimanju at Homuraan-Shirasawa Village



Katashina River viewed from Oigami Onsen – Tone Village

Continue north along Route 120 for fifteen kilometers to Oigami Onsen in Tone Village. Oigami has a number of onsen hotels on either side of the river for overnight guests, as well as onsens for travelers who are just passing through. Still farther up stream and also in Tone Village is Fukiwari no Taki, a

shallow but impressively shaped waterfall. From April to November one can take a walk right beside the waterfall, so plan accordingly.

Visitors to adjacent Katashina Village in the summer should make Oze a stop along their route. Oze's many wetland flowers are in full bloom in July. Winter brings ski and snowboard enthusiasts to the slopes of Katashina's many ski resorts. After a day of skiing, soaking in Hanasaku Onsen is a great way to rejuvenate.

From Hanasaku Onsen take Route 64, the long and winding mountain road, back to Numata through Kawaba Village. Kawaba boasts a Michi No Eki (Kawaba Den'en Plaza) with a micro-brewery! Drinking and driving is strictly prohibited in Japan, so be sure to appoint a designated driver. There is also a shuttle bus service from the Michi No Eki to Kawaba Ski Area on the slopes of Mt. Hotaka.

Niiharu Village: Onsen Paradise

Niiharu Village is also located in the northern mountainous region of Gunma and is accessible by Japan's world famous shinkansen, or "bullet" train. From Jomo Kogen Station on the JR Joetsu Shinkansen Line, take a 20-25 minute bus ride to Takumi No Sato where visitors can experience traditional Japanese culture up close. Start your exploration of the area at the visitor information center. Try making soba or udon, two types of delicious and healthy Japanese noodles. Bicycle rental is available, or take a walk around the village. Quaint shops offer hands-on experience at weaving, carving, painting, and glass painting. Design and take home original souvenirs!

Located at about a twenty minute walk from the Takumi No Sato visitor information center is serenely beautiful Taineiji Temple. From middle to late July the temple grounds are rich with myriad shades of blue, pink, and white as the hydrangea bloom impressively. Taineiji is also famous for its autumn foliage.

About five kilometers north of Takumi No Sato and also accessible by bus is Sarugakyo Onsen. Hugging the steep northern bank of Lake Akaya, Sarugakyo's hotels and Japanese style inns offer lovely views of the lake and surrounding hills. For visitors staying overnight at Sarugakyo, be sure to try an outdoor hot spring (rotenburo) under the starry night sky.

Nestled in the mountains approximately six kilometers west of Sarugakyo is secluded Hoshi Onsen. In contrast with a typical lively Japanese onsen town with numerous inns, Hoshi Onsen has only one inn, Chojukan. Built in 1875, Chojukan is arguably one of the most beautiful inns in Japan. The main bath house is made almost entirely of wood, with distinctive arched windows. Although the changing rooms are separate for men and women, the bath area is

mixed. Women reluctant to share a bath with men need not worry; from 8:00 to 10:00pm the main bath house is for women only. There is also a separate women's bath open 24 hours a day, and an outdoor one for overnight guests. Buses to and from Jomo Kogen Station leave around four times a day. For a relaxing, uniquely Japanese experience, don't miss this gem of an onsen.



**Charming Takumi No Sato –
Niiharu Village**



Hoshi Onsen – Niiharu Village

NIIGATA

By Melissa Villarreal

“The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country” is the first line from Yasunari Kawabata’s Nobel prize-winning book featuring Niigata, *Snow Country*. Even today, visitors who take the two-hour train ride on the *Joetsu shinkansen* from Tokyo experience this as they pass through the tunnel separating Niigata from Gunma Prefecture. Renowned for its heavy yearly



snowfall and good food, Niigata is sometimes considered to be a very rural area with not much to see by people from other prefectures. While Niigata is indeed rural, it has a very distinct culture that residents feel a great deal of pride towards, and that retains many aspects of its cultural past. Traveling Niigata is the only way to understand its rich history and culture and to learn a little more about Japan.

To the north of the prefecture along the Japan Sea coast lies the city of Murakami. Murakami was once a castle city, and much of its city still reflects this, from its still existing moat to the winding streets that made it difficult for enemies to attack. Murakami residents have a deep pride in their city’s history, especially in their salmon and tea industries. As I



Salmon industry

was often told as I wandered about the city, Murakami just so happens to be located favorably, both in climate range and geographically, to have the environment to support these famous industries. Also, deeply rooted in Murakami's history is one of its famous crafts: Tsuishu lacquerware. Being only one of three places in Japan to make red lacquerware, it is quite famous and can be found in people's homes throughout the city and department stores



throughout Japan. And while Niigata is also famous for hot springs (*onsen*), Murakami is lucky enough to have its own *onsen* area right by the sea. This location is quite unique because it gives *onsen* goers an opportunity to gaze out at the sunset over the Japan Sea while bathing. After visiting various locations in Murakami throughout the day, taking a

dip in the *onsen* and watching the sun set was just the thing to warm me up and relax me after a lovely day of exploring.

Just south of Murakami lies Shibata City. Like Murakami, Shibata was also a castle town, but its castle ruins still remain. The main gate and the turret have been recreated from the old castle, and two more turrets are currently under construction and will be completed in March 2004. As Shibata was a castle town, its daimyo had a great deal of influence on the city, and his contribution to Shibata was tea ceremony. Shibata's daimyo truly enjoyed tea ceremony, and he created the

stunning Shimizu-en Garden for his private tea ceremonies. At the same time, the Japanese sweets industry flourished in Shibata (Japanese sweets are an integral part of tea ceremony). To this day both the garden and industry remain, and Shibata residents still have an affinity for Japanese sweets. Further, as



Niigata is famous nationwide for its sake, so is Shibata famous for it within the prefecture, with a long and distinguished history of brewing some of Niigata's best. Most of the sights are right by Shibata Station, making it convenient to sightsee on foot.



Towards the south in places such as Tokamachi and Yuzawa lies the true "snow country", so named for its unusually heavy snowfall. Although recent years have seen a decline in snowfall, it is not uncommon to record 3-4 meters of snow in winter. Tokamachi, home of the Tokamachi Snow Festival and Chijimi crepe (valued for kimono making) has a wide variety of things to try and experience. At Kinare, people

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can try on real kimono and experience various dyeing, painting, and other textile-making techniques. Also, the area is famous for soba noodles, which are some of the best in the country. At Yuzawa, the main attractions are without a doubt skiing (it is one of



the best soba in the country

the foremost ski resorts in Niigata) and various exhibits relating to Yasunari Kawabata, who wrote about Yuzawa in his book. Because of its plethora of ski slopes and *onsen*, and various *ryokan* serving fantastic food, it is easy to see why Yuzawa is such a famous ski resort.

Although the image of Niigata to many Japanese is “snow”, Niigata has much more to offer visitors than just skiing: great food, a rich culture, and friendly people. Although Niigata has something to offer visitors during any season, for those who want to enjoy winter in Japan and the wonders of “snow country”, I invite you to come and experience Niigata.

NAGANO

by Julia Jones

Though primarily recognized overseas for hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics, Nagano Prefecture offers a great deal more than winter sports. In fact, there are so many wonderful tourist destinations around the prefecture that the most difficult aspect of travel planning is choosing which to include in one’s itinerary.

One area which should by all means be included is Bessho Onsen, a hot spring village southeast of Ueda City. Bessho, also known as the “Kamakura of Shinshu” because of its many temples, is home to the oldest hot spring in Nagano Prefecture and provides a wealth of opportunities to learn about the interplay between Japanese history, Buddhism and the natural resources of the region, as well as an unbeatable chance to talk with local citizens. While non-speakers of Japanese may be daunted by travel into the Japanese countryside, the best part of a trip to the area is the opportunity to take advantage of the services offered by volunteer English-speaking tour guides.

Those planning a trip to the Ueda City/Bessho Onsen area may contact the English Guide Group (acronym EGG) either directly (TEL 0268-38-8157, thesatos@janis.or.jp) or through the Ueda City Hall’s Tourism Division (TEL

0268-23-5408, kankoka@city.ueda.nagano.jp). For my two-day trip to the area, I was able to retain two EGG guides, the first of whom met me upon my arrival at Ueda Station. Upon meeting, we discussed a schedule of places to see and visit, and my guide provided all transportation in her car. Particularly for a single tourist, I doubt there can be a better way to experience the local area.

The first stop on the trip was to a pick-your-own strawberry farm. For 1200 yen, visitors can spend half an hour picking and eating hydroponically grown strawberries. The farm, Higashiyama Kankou Nouen, is the largest pick-your-own farm in Nagano, and depending on the season offers flower-, apple- (Sept.-Nov.), grape- (Aug.-Oct.) and strawberry-picking (Jan.-Feb.). While reservations are recommended for weekend visits, the Higashiyama staff assured me that foreigners may come along without prior notice. The farm is open 10am-4pm daily and is closed on Tuesdays.



Next, my guide and I traveled to the Mugon-kan, or Shrine of Speechlessness. Opened in 1997, this museum on a hill resembles a European abbey and exhibits the work of art students who were conscripted to join the Japanese army in World War Two and died on the battlefield. Speaking is prohibited inside the museum so that visitors can fully appreciate the loss of the young artists while viewing the unfinished pre-war paintings, and the letters and sketches sent home during the war. A written message at the entrance to the museum describes the museum's purpose: "The art students died, but they did not lose their passion for painting, nor their hope for living, until their last breath... in these last drawings can be found the traces and remains of an earnest life as well as the regret of having to take up arms rather than a paintbrush." The museum is open from 10am-5pm daily and visitors are encouraged to make a donation of 200-500 yen upon exit.

Our next destination was Zensan-ji Temple and the Three-Storeyed Pagoda. Zensan-ji is said to be founded by a monk named Kobo Daishi in the Heian period (794-1192) and is noted for its leading role in teaching monks. Walking along the tree-lined path to the temple is reputed to cleanse the spirit, and upon reaching the end of the path, the three-tiered pagoda comes into view. Designated a "Cultural Asset of National Importance", the pagoda is famous for its lack of windows and balconies, and it is therefore called "The Uncompleted but Perfect Pagoda".

The final stop of the day was Ryoukan Tsuruya, one of the oldest Japanese inns in Bessho. With only 14 rooms, Tsuruya is the perfect place to get away and relax in the inn's private hot spring. Following a 10-course kaiseki dinner served in my room, I was a bit apprehensive of bathing in a shared bath, but to my relief I was able to enjoy both the indoor and outdoor baths in solitude. While it takes some time to become accustomed to the hydrogen sulfide smell of the spa, the hot springs of Bessho are known for the smoothing and beautifying effect its waters have on the skin.



kaiseki dinner

In addition to the hot spring baths available at the local hotels and inns, Bessho is unique in offering four public spas which are available to both local citizens and travelers. One of these, the Oyu ("big bath") is located just a few steps from Tsuruya, and two others, Ishiyu ("stone bath") and Daishiyu (named after one of the original high priests of the area) are located within a short walking distance. In spring and summer, travelers walk from spa to spa wearing light cotton kimonos. The entrance fee for each spa is a mere 150 yen.

Returning after my bath, I relaxed by my room's wide window and looked out onto a snowy rocky hill with a stone statue near the top. The only sound was that of water trickling into a small pond, and above the sky was black velvet. Though each room has a television with several channels (one of which featured foreign movies in English), I elected to go to bed early and enjoy sleeping on the traditional futons laid out by the inn's staff.

In the morning, I was awoken by a phone call from the inn's staff, offering to bring breakfast. Once again I sat under the warm kotatsu (heated table) and enjoyed a simple Japanese breakfast of grilled salmon, miso soup, white rice, pickles, hot tofu and green tea, followed by a cup of strong coffee. As I still had almost an hour until the arrival of my tour guide for the day, I began the day with a bath in the hot spring.

Checking out of the inn, my guide and I walked to the main gate of Bessho which is inscribed with the words "I appear everywhere, whenever people wish protection." This is the entrance to the Kitamuki Kannon, a temple founded in 825 and whose Buddha protects people in the present life. (The Buddha at Zenkouji Temple in Nagano City protects people in the afterlife, so many Japanese visit both.) To the side of the temple is a 1200 year old Katsura Tree,



known as the “Aizen Katsura”. Since the tree bears leaves in the shape of hearts, it is said that single people who come to the tree will meet their perfect partner there. Next to the Kitamuki Kannon, is the symbol of Bessho Onsen, Yakushi-do, a smaller temple enshrining the medicine god, who protects people with the hot springs.

Kitamuki Kannon

A short walk away is the Anraku-ji Temple, which was founded in the 13th century (Kamakura period) and is the oldest Zen sect temple in Nagano. Anraku-ji is famous for its octagonal wooden pagoda, the only one of its kind in the world. Designated a “National Treasure”, the entire structure of the pagoda was built without nails, so each piece is fitted into the whole as in a puzzle. My guide explained the historical and religious significance of pagodas, which represent the five elements of the universe: sky, wind, fire, water and earth. Though structurally small, only 18.5 meters in height, the pagoda and its intricate woodwork is indeed something to behold.



The third major temple of our visit is the Joraku-ji Temple, whose name means “free from worry”. The original temple was built in the early 9th century, though it was rebuilt most recently three hundred years ago. Joraku-ji was founded by Jikaku Daishi, who came from Kyoto’s Enraku-ji Temple, and the pagoda of this temple is made from stone. My trip happened to fall upon “Setsubun”, the day of the bean-throwing festival, in which beans are thrown to keep good luck near and the demons away. Joraku-ji was the starting point for a parade of demons,

local celebrities and children, who walked to the Kitamuki Kannon for Setsubun festivities. Priests and local celebrities throw peanuts, mandarin oranges and cookies to the assembled crowd, and those who catch the goodies are said to receive good luck.

Having already visited Kitamuki Kannon, my guide suggested we drive to a Shinto shrine to participate in the festivities there. We drove back toward Ueda City and disembarked at the Ikushima-Tarushima Shrine, which is located at the geographical center of Japan. The most striking feature of the shrine is the bright orange color of the gates, bridge and buildings, a welcome contrast to the drab brown-grey of the temples. The shrine is built on a small island in the middle of a pond, which must be accessed by crossing a bridge. The shrine is named for Ikushima, the god of vitality, harvest, health and easy childbirth, and Tarushima, the god of satisfaction and good fortune in business, marriage and school entrance examinations.



Ikushima-Tarushima Shrine

The final stop on the trip was Ueda Castle, a fascinating piece of Japanese history. Located near the present day Ueda Station, the castle is a symbol of Japan's civil war era, in which samurai clans fought for control of the country. At the time, the Tokugawa clan and Toyotomi clans were the strongest and were fighting for control of Ueda Castle, one of the most coveted prizes. The castle's owner, known for his bravery and cleverness, arranged mazes and moats around the castle to keep enemies away, and his guards repelled the Tokugawa shogun's armies two times, making Ueda Castle famous throughout Japan.

Ueda City is easily accessible from Tokyo via the Nagano Shinkansen, and from Ueda there is a special train line to Bessho Onsen. Happy traveling!