

Kiyotsu Gorge Tunnel. The breathtaking view of the gorge, glimpsed from the tunnel, swiftly gained traction on social media, drawing a surge of tourists. Ma Yansong / MAD Architects' "Tunnel of Light" (a work for the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field).

## FEATURES

# A City Where You Can Encounter Culture Unique To Snow Country And Contemporary Art

**Tokamachi City in Niigata Prefecture is one of Japan's most renowned heavy snowfall areas. The abundance of snow, the blessings it brings, and the richness of life that makes the most of the snow are proudly termed "Snow Rich" by Tokamachi, and this concept is widely promoted both domestically and internationally. We spoke to an official of city's cultural tourism about its initiatives.**

**(Text: Tanaka Nozomi)**

**T**okamachi City is in the mountainous region of southern Niigata Prefecture, specifically in the Tokamachi Basin. One of the city's most distinguishing features is that from December to April, even in the urban areas, there is an average snow accumulation of two meters. This profound snowfall causes both the landscape and the lifestyle of its inhabitants to undergo a striking transformation, contrasting sharply with the snow-free months from May to November. Hatori Daisuke, who oversees cultural tourism promotion at the Tokamachi City Hall, notes, "Within the city limits, we have archaeological sites from the Jomon<sup>1</sup> period, from which numerous artifacts have been unearthed. For an extremely long period, the people of this area have lived with snow and nature, passing down wisdom and culture through generations.

During the snow-free seasons, the people of this



Photo: Tokamachi City Cultural and Tourism Promotion Council

Winter scene of a rural home in the mountains. The first floor of the building is buried in snow, and shoveling snow becomes a daily chore.

region stay busy with rice cultivation and fieldwork. They also prepare for winter by making preserved foods from wild vegetables. As snow begins to fall, weaving on looms becomes a predominant household activity. This tradition played a pivotal role in establishing the area as one of Japan's premier kimono production centers. In the Edo period, from the early 17th century to the latter part of the 19th century, a luxury summer linen fabric known as *Echigo Chijimi*<sup>2</sup> was extensively produced. Later, the primary material transitioned from linen to

silk, and by the early 20th century, the region was producing a summer silk fabric named *Akashi Chijimi*. After that, the production expanded to include fabrics for autumn and winter, solidifying the region's reputation as a year-round textile production center.

“The wisdom of preserving food for extended periods<sup>3</sup> includes using snow to create storage, smoking river fish over a sunken hearth<sup>4</sup> with heat and smoke and making wild vegetables last longer by drying or pickling them. There have been continuous improvements in cooking methods to keep food tasty and fresh,” explains Hatori.

Actually, there are approximately 100 shops and facilities in the city known as “Snow-Rich Spots,” where one can experience this unique snow culture. Local people who work at these facilities act as guides, sharing with tourists the joys of life in a snowy area. At various points of interest, such as accommodation facilities, kimono workshops, taxi companies, craft beer breweries, and soba noodle shops, there are guides available to assist visitors. The objective moving forward is to offer multilingual support at each of these locations.

Another allure of Tokamachi City is the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field. This modern art festival commenced in 2000 and has been ongoing for over 20 years. Throughout the year, visitors can enjoy around



Above: The winter landscape of terraced rice fields<sup>5</sup> is breathtaking with its snow-covered beauty.

Below: Yayoi Kusama's “Tsumari in Bloom”. Among her few outdoor pieces worldwide, this one is in the Matsudai Nohbutai Field Museum.

200 permanent artworks. In addition, there are seasonal programs and tours available. Every three years, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale graces the art scene, showcasing many new pieces from global artists. More than just an exhibition, it transforms the entire countryside into a vast canvas of creativity. This extensive display, unveiling countless artworks, ranks as one of the largest contemporary art spectacles globally.

Essentially, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field is a unique event where the whole rural landscape's becomes an immersive gallery, making it one of the world's premier art displays with a diverse range of pieces spread out over a vast terrain.

Mr. Hatori shares, “While the next Art Triennale is set for 2024, around 200 works by both domestic and overseas artists are always on display. They're naturally placed throughout the mountains, villages, and connecting pathways, creating a harmonious blend of snowy culture and modern art. Think of it as a vast museum where the art guides you, allowing you to experience both the historical and cultural facets of the region, all set against the backdrop of its ever-changing seasons.”

The rich culture unique to snow regions and contemporary art stand as the two major pillars of Tokamachi City's cultural tourism. Both the snowy season and the times without snow present their own distinct allure. It's certainly worth a visit to experience it firsthand. **7**

Left: During winter, dishes such as stews are made using salt-preserved and dried wild vegetables and other vegetables. Salt-preserved leafy vegetables are eaten as they are during winter, and come spring, those that have been over-pickled are desalted and cooked. This wisdom ensures no food goes to waste.

Above center: The regionally originated *Hegi Soba* is served in a thin box called *hegi*. The soba uses *funori* (a type of seaweed) as a binder. It is said to have started when *funori*, which was used for starching weaving threads, was incorporated into the soba.

Below center: The *Kaengata* pottery excavated from archaeological sites in the city, thought to be from around 5,000 years ago, has been designated a national treasure and is on permanent display at the Tokamachi City Museum.

Right: The kimono industry in Tokamachi is characterized by its integrated production within the city, and even often within a single company. Due to the difficulties in transportation caused by snow, both the weaving and dyeing processes, beginning from the design stage, are carried out in a single workshop. These unique workshops, where all stages of production can be observed, attract many tourists who come for both viewing and hands-on experiences.



1. The Jomon period is one of the historical eras in Japan. Recently, it is generally considered to span from about 16,500 years ago to about 3,000 years ago.
2. This hemp fabric, which uses the snow to its advantage, stands out due to its unique production method. Made with tightly twisted yarn, it feels soft against the skin, which has led to its popularity as a material for summer kimonos. Tokamachi and the broader Uonuma region are its main production areas.
3. The preservation of food in this region is adapted to its seasons. In the warmer months of spring to summer, a natural cooling method called *yukimuro* (snow-aging) is employed. This involves maintaining vast amounts of snow until summer, using it to chill and preserve foodstuffs. During winter, food preservation practices are more varied: wild vegetables might be dried or salted, sweet potatoes stored in the warm interiors of homes, cabbages buried within snow, and Chinese cabbages and leeks hung in cooler indoor areas, such as workshops, to ensure the outer layer dries. Leafy greens might be transformed into pickles. Each method is carefully crafted to suit the specific type of food being preserved.
4. An indoor space where the floor is cut out to create a place for making a fire, used for both heating and cooking.
5. Terraced rice fields, carved into mountain slopes and inclined lands, form a picturesque step-like pattern.