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WORLD HERITAGE IN RURAL JAPAN

Jon Letman visits the *gassho zukuri* located in the mountains of Gifu and Toyama Prefectures

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The *gassho zukuri* in winter...

the *gassho*, which, as the name implies, rise steeply in a manner reminiscent of hands folded in prayer, once numbered more than 1,800. Today less than 150 remain.

Scarcely visited before receiving UNESCO's World Heritage designation in 1995, the region was cut off from the rest of Japan both geographically and culturally until the spotlight fell on the three small hamlets. In summer's high season, Ogimachi in Shirakawa-go looks more like Arashiyama on a Sunday than the quiet pocket of farm houses it was in the early Showa period. German architect Bruno Taut then "discovered" Gokayama and introduced the *gassho*-style houses to the outside world.

Today, both Shirakawa-go and Gokayama can be reached by a combination of train and bus or car in just five hours from Osaka, though heavy snowfall in the winter can slow transport considerably. It is this relative accessibility that allows tour buses to deposit sightseers on the west bank of the Sho River opposite Ogimachi, the largest of the three villages, from where they cross Deai bashi into town to wander and wonder. Back on the west bank of the river, tourists flock to an outdoor museum and Gassho Zukuri Ethnic Park where they can dabble in local crafts like making hand woven baskets, straw sandals (*waraji*), soba and silk weaving on a handloom.

With 59 *gassho*-style houses and buildings, Ogimachi receives the most visitors, as is evident by the rows of souvenir shops lining the main street. Decidedly on the beaten track, the village has succumbed, to a degree, to the trappings of tourism, but nonetheless is well worth a visit. Both Ogimachi and Ainokura have gone to great lengths to maintain their cultural integrity, seeking to limit the impact of tourism through strictly enforced building codes and regulations regarding pets, alcohol and tobacco (in an effort to avoid fires, Ainokura has prohibited smoking throughout the village). Traditional folk songs waft out of souvenir shops and even the modest number of vending machines have been painted brown so as to be less intrusive.

By sundown, most of the tourists have been whisked away to their next destination and the village returns to its peaceful state, where the rustic beauty of the *gassho zukuri* can truly be enjoyed. Both Ogimachi and Ainokura have ample accommodation, including a number of *gassho*-style houses which serve as guest houses (*minshuku*) (28 in Ogimachi, 7 in Ainokura), offering two meals and lodging for \pm 7-8,000 yen a night.

In a country where families dwell in apartments once famously referred to as "rabbit hutches," it may come as a surprise to learn that there are houses standing four stories high that can sleep up to 50. Deep in the heart of Gifu and Toyama Prefectures, surrounded by ski resorts and hot springs, the villages of Ainokura, Taira-mura and Ogimachi are home to thatched gable roof houses (*gassho zukuri*), which offer a glimpse at relics of a Japan now lost.

Surrounded by 1,500-meter-high mountains, Shirakawa-go and Gokayama as they are collectively known, are cultural anomalies in the age of 3-LDK living. With massive gable-style roofs made from bundles of pampas grass (*susuki*),



...and in spring



The famous thatched gable roof

dishes like grilled river char (*iwana*), bracken (*warabi*), miniature bamboo (*susudake*) and vegetables simmered in miso on a giant magnolia leaf (*hoba no misoyaki*). On cold nights a large bowl of hot sake served with grilled *iwana* (*kotsuzake*) is passed around as stories are shared beside the fire.

For the Kansai urbanite living in a one-room mansion, it is all too easy to forget that there still exists a deep river gorge where the autumn frost brings a blush to the mountainside and winter means snow boots and shovels. Traditional, accessible and yet so removed from the frenzy of the city, Shirakawa-go and Gokayama await.

Detailed information can be obtained by contacting: Taira-mura Yakuba Sangyo Kanko-ka, Taira-mura, Shimonashi 2467, Higashi Tonami-gun, Toyama-ken, 939-1997. Tel.0763-66-2131; fax.0763-66-2130. <http://www.triton.ad.jp/gokayama> or Shirakawa-go Kanko Kyokai, Shirakawa-mura, Ogimachi, Oono-gun, Gifu-ken, 501-5627. Tel.0576-96-1751 or 0576-96-1013.

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