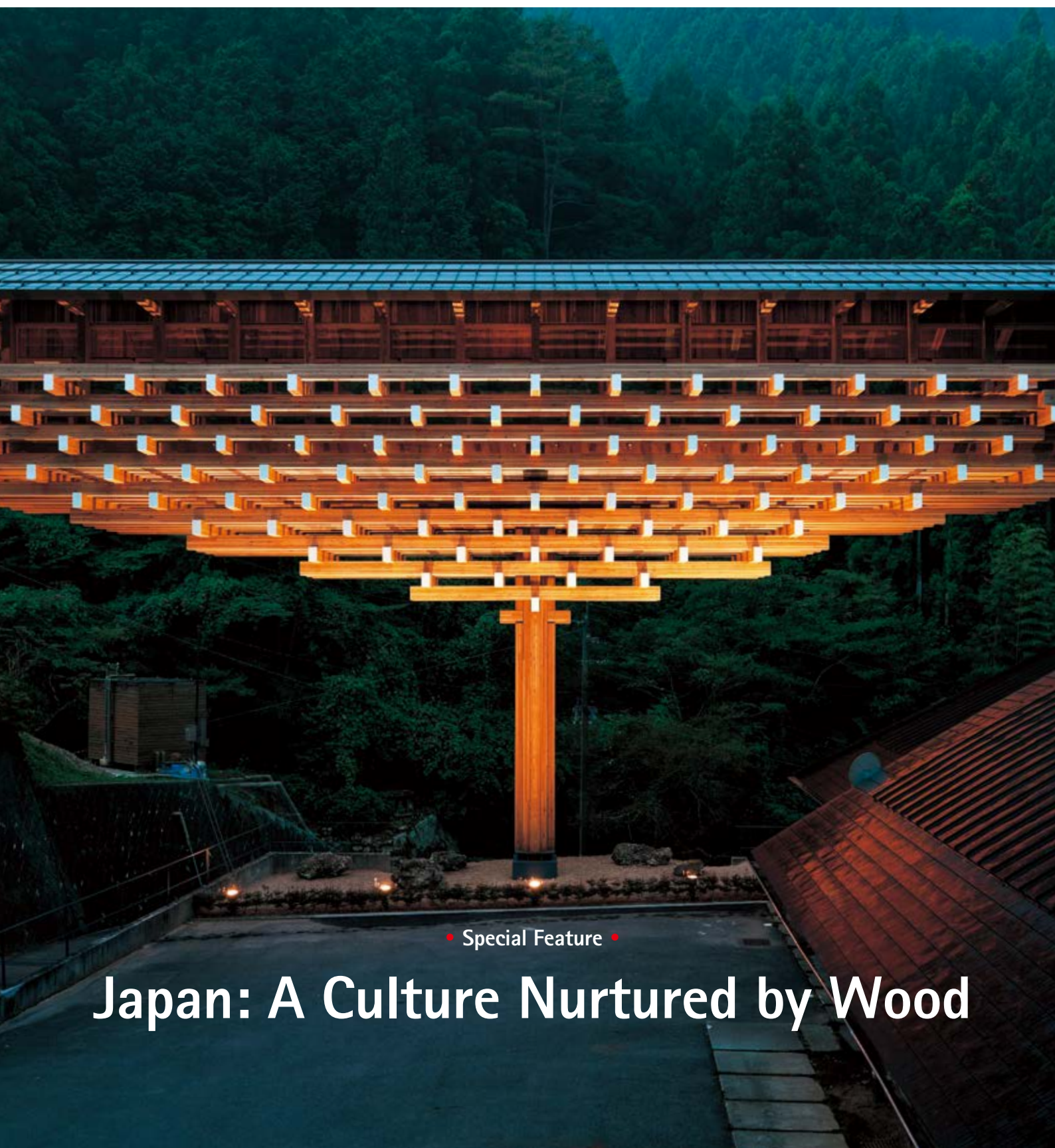


niponica

Discovering  
Japan

にほにか

no. 32



• Special Feature •

Japan: A Culture Nurtured by Wood





• Special Feature •

# Japan: A Culture Nurtured by Wood

In Japan, where 70% of the land is covered in forest, trees are an integral part of everyday life. The techniques and wisdom passed down through the ages by Japanese people with a deep respect for nature and its bounty live on today.

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*Cherry and Maple Trees (Sakura kaede-zu byōbu), right screen, by Edo period painter Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1829)*  
Cover photo: Yusuvara Wooden Bridge Museum  
Photography by ©Takumi Ota

*niponica* is published in Japanese and six other languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) to introduce to the world the people and culture of Japan today. The title *niponica* is derived from "Nippon," the Japanese word for Japan.

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# Most Impressive Wooden Architecture

For hundreds or even thousands of years, every generation has cared for Japanese temples and shrines. Restored and rebuilt to preserve the splendor of the past, the sublime beauty of these wooden structures offers the visitor an extraordinary experience.

## Byodoin Phoenix Hall

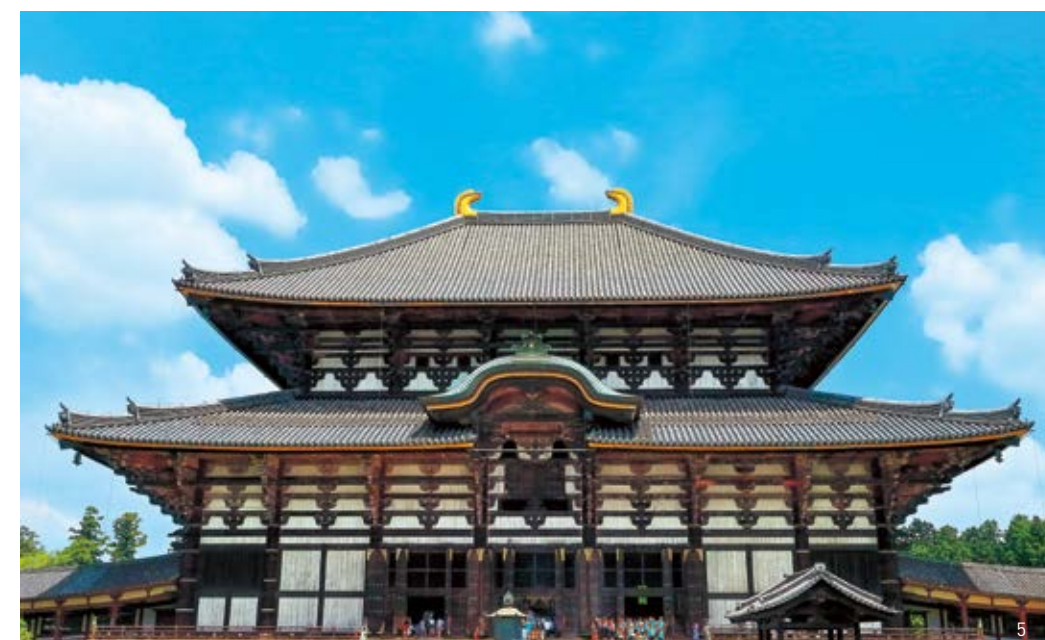
Above: Built in the 11th century in Kyoto Prefecture, this temple was restored from 2012 to 2014 to the vibrant colors of its original construction. (Photo: Byodoin)

## Ruriko-ji Five-Storied Pagoda

Top right: This five-storied pagoda built in the 15th century at Ruriko-ji Temple in Yamaguchi Prefecture stands 31 meters tall. The large, curved *hiwada buki* roof (see page 8) gives the building a graceful elegance. (Photo: PIXTA)

## Todai-ji Great Buddha Hall

Bottom right: The Great Buddha Hall at Todai-ji Temple in Nara Prefecture is one of the largest traditional wooden buildings in the world, measuring 57 meters along the front, 50 meters deep, and 47 meters tall. Its frontage is said to have measured 86 meters when it was originally built in the 8th century. (Photo: PIXTA)







# Traditional Building Techniques Passed Down Through the Ages

The workmanship of craftspeople who preserve traditional building techniques is at the heart of the culture of wooden architecture in Japan. Here, we introduce the finest of these techniques, which are listed by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Photos: Kawabe Akinobu



1. Shitenno-ji Temple was the first officially administered temple built in Japan. Kongo Gumi, a group of master carpenters, was again involved in its reconstruction in the early 20th century. (Photo: PIXTA)
2. Master carpenter Kiuchi Shigeo (left) and Kongo Gumi chairman Tone Kenichi. The flag is called the Banshoki, with "Namu Amida Butsu" (a Buddhist *nembutsu* invocation) spelled out in images of planes, chisels, saws, and other tools of the carpentry trade.
3. A *kanna* plane is used to shave the surface of the wood.
4. Curves are created gradually using a chisel. Each stage of carpentry is done by hand.
5. Kiuchi's carpentry tools. He has many different types of planes, hammers, and other tools on hand, each for a different purpose.



6. Top: Kiuchi uses model pieces of wood to explain *tsugite* joints. Bottom: One piece of wood is sharpened to a tip with the joining piece cut to fit its mate perfectly.
7. *Shiguchi* joints connect interlocking pillars and beams. Timber cut to exact measurements is combined in intricate patterns of lines and angles to create strong wooden structures.



## Master Carpentry with a 1,400-Year History

In Japan, temples and shrines are built and restored by specialized craftspeople called *miyadaiku*. Kongo Gumi Co., Ltd., located in Osaka City, is one of Japan's leading groups of *miyadaiku*. Believed to have originated with the construction of the Shitenno-ji Temple built in 593, it is also known as the oldest company in the world.

Kiuchi Shigeo of Kongo Gumi is a veteran master carpenter with a career spanning more than 50 years. As a *toryo*, or master carpenter, he oversees the younger carpenters. Using a *kanna* plane, he planes wood into shavings that unfurl like thin strips of ribbon. His technique creates shavings thinner than paper, the result of years of training.

One of the most important traditional techniques in temple and shrine construction is called *kigumi*, a method of joining wood without nails or metal fittings. *Kigumi* leaves the wood less susceptible to damage caused by corroded metal, and these types of joints also absorb and disperse vibration, adding strength to withstand earthquakes.

Kiuchi explains, "The main *kigumi* techniques are *tsugite* joints, which splice two pieces of wood together to form a

pillar or beam, and *shiguchi* joints, which interlock pillars and beams at angles. Depending on the strength of the timber and the design of the building, a variety of methods are necessary, and there are more than 200 *kigumi* techniques."

*Miyadaiku* must possess not only full knowledge of the characteristics of wood, but also a thorough understanding of techniques for cutting wood and Japanese culture, as well. This is why it takes over ten years to become a full-fledged carpenter.

With the number of young people aspiring to become *miyadaiku* falling in recent years, training the next generation of carpenters has become a major challenge. Solving this, however, as Tone Kenichi, chairman of Kongo Gumi says, "is not simply a matter of teaching technique."

"What we build are structures where the Buddha and the gods reside, structures that will be cherished by people in the community. *Miyadaiku* must also understand the emotions that the people devote to these temples and shrines."





1. *Hiwada buki* roof of a building at Kumano Hongu Taisha Shrine (Photo: PIXTA)  
 2. A *motokawashi* climbs a tree over 10m tall to collect the outer bark.  
 3. A special knife is used to shape the bark.  
 4. Cypress bark soaked in water is laid out side by side.  
 5. Structures are roofed with great precision using different layering techniques on different areas of the roof. (Photos 2–5: National Society for the Preservation of Shrine and Temple Roofing Techniques)

## Artistic Roofs Made of Layers of Bark

Traditional Japanese architecture employs a variety of roofing methods, including ceramic tiles, thatch from Japanese pampas grass or reeds, and shingles in Japanese cedar and Sawara cypress. Of these, *hiwada buki* roofing made from layers of Japanese cypress bark involves a remarkable technique unique to Japan.

For this technique, the outer bark from a standing Japanese cypress nearly 100 years old is used. The bark is collected by a specialist called a *motokawashi* who inserts a bark spud at the base and peels the bark off from bottom to top. This is done without damaging the inner bark, so

the outer bark will regrow in about ten years and can be collected again.

Once the bark is collected, craftspeople cut 75cm by 15cm strips and lay them out one by one. The strips are layered at 1.2cm intervals and tacked in place with bamboo nails every five layers or so. Arduous repetition of intricate layers eventually creates a gracefully curved, yet thick and solid roof.

As a sustainable construction method using materials from nature, the value of this technique has been recognized anew in recent years.

## Coloring Techniques That Reproduce the Look of the Past

Coloring architectural carvings and paintings is an essential component of restoring temple and shrine buildings. The objective is to reproduce the original look of the building. The condition of the specific section is first analyzed, and appropriate techniques are considered. Glue, lacquer, mineral pigments and other natural pigments used in Japanese paintings are then used to fill in peeling patches and restore the design to its original state. Coloration also plays an important role in restoration work in terms of protecting the wood, as well.



6. Known for its magnificent carvings, the Karamon gate of Nishi Hongan-ji Temple was restored for the first time in some 40 years, beginning in June 2018 and continuing for a period of three years and four months. (Photo: Nishi Hongan-ji Temple)  
 7. A craftsman restores a gate carving. Fluorescent X-rays analysis, archive research, and other tools are employed to identify the pigments used when the gate was originally built. (Photo: Kawamo Art Research Institute)

## Sturdy, Beautiful Partitions Made with Fine Woodworking Techniques

In traditional Japanese architecture, *tategu* fittings such as doors and windows are considered as important as the structure itself. Delicate woodworking techniques using light, thin wood are essential for making fittings that are both easy to use and strong enough to withstand frequent opening and closing every day. Only the best cypress, cedar, pine, zelkova, and other woods with small tree rings and clear grain are selected in order to prevent cracking and warping once the fittings are assembled. *Tategu* restored by master craftspeople are durable enough to last for hundreds of years.



8. A kind of window fitting called *shitomido* installed in Daihoon-ji Temple, built approximately 800 years ago (left side of photo). (Photo: Aflo)  
 9. Suzuki Tadashi, a wood *tategu* master, has been involved in the crafting and repair of traditional fittings for over 60 years. In recent years, he has been focused on passing on his skills to younger carpenters. (Photo: National Society for the Preservation of Traditional Fitting Techniques)  
 10. Crafting a square-latticed window fitting *shitomido*. There is absolutely no room for error in latticework. (Photo: National Society for the Preservation of Traditional Fitting Techniques)





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# Wood That Creates the Ultimate in Calming Relaxation

Japan's first excursion train, the Nanatsuboshi in Kyushu ("Seven Stars"), debuted in 2013. This luxury train brings together the very best that Japanese master craftsmanship has to offer as it travels across the island of Kyushu.

Painted royal wine red, the train body is adorned with shiny gold emblems. With the refined charm of a luxury hotel, the Nanatsuboshi is a sightseeing sleeper train offering first-class service between well-known Kyushu destinations in southwestern Japan.

Spacious guest rooms with large observation windows and a lounge car with a counter bar are bathed in warmth and elegance. This ambience is undoubtedly created by the vast amount of wood used in the car interiors.

Although the interior appears to be crafted entirely in wood, the fact is that special techniques were employed

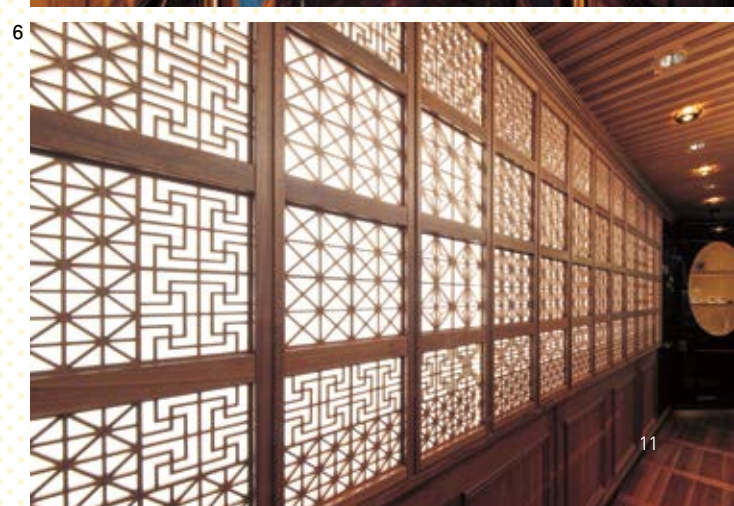
to ensure both strength and fire resistance. The walls and ceilings may look like full wood, but remarkably they are made of boards of natural wood just 0.2mm thick backed with aluminum. To create the arched lattice ceiling and decorative walls, master craftspeople painstakingly laid the veneer strips by hand, taking great care to reproduce a surprisingly natural-looking wood texture.

The Nanatsuboshi train is also gorgeously decorated with traditional Okawa Kumiko wood joinery, a technique from Okawa City in Fukuoka Prefecture, Kyushu area, which has been passed down from generation to generation.

1. Nanatsuboshi in Kyushu steams through the lush green nature of Kyushu.
2. Train emblem sparkles like gold.
3. Passengers can even try their hand at making Okawa Kumiko while riding on the train.
4. Deluxe suite passengers can immerse themselves in the scenic views out the large windows of their room.
5. The Lounge Car serves as a lounge in the afternoons and a bar in the evenings.
6. Light passing through the Okawa Kumiko wall brings the delicate patterns to life.

This woodcraft technique features geometric patterns created by assembling pieces of wood using slits and grooves. Master craftsmanship involving adjustments of mere microns results in delicately beautiful work that is also strong and sturdy. The Okawa Kumiko adorning the train walls and windows softens the light, reflecting beautiful patterns to relax and soothe passengers.

Experience for yourself the ultimate in calming relaxation — all that wood has to offer — on a once-in-a-lifetime train journey through magnificent island nature and beautiful vistas.



6





# Woodwork That Blends the Contemporary and the Traditional

Contemporary woodwork brings the warmth of nature and the style of great design together in pieces that evoke tradition, yet blend seamlessly with modern lifestyles.

## The soft glow of wooden curves

This light fixture features a complex design of wooden curves created with a material made with a layer of cherry wood over clear polypropylene. Shaped by the wooden curves, the light casts flower-like shadows on the ceiling and walls. (Photo: Tani Toshiyuki, Lighting Designer)



## World-renowned contoured chair

The Butterfly Stool is made of two sheets of plywood molded into curved shapes that mirror each other on the left and right to form a butterfly shape. This innovative and simple form by designer Yanagi Sori is admired over the world, and his chairs are part of collections in such museums as the Louvre. (Photo: TENDO CO., LTD.)

## Chair doubles as a rocking horse

This child chair is both comfortable and safe. The height of the seat can be adjusted as the child grows, and it is designed to hold an adult, as well. Flip it over and it becomes a rocking horse that kids will love to play with. (Photo: Sdi Co., Ltd.)



## The sound of music flows from the wood

The woodworking traditions of Hida Takayama in Gifu Prefecture are brought to contemporary life in cutting-edge headphones. The case is made of hardwood maple for good sound reverberation, and the ear covers are made of soft cypress wood to feel nice against the skin. (Photo: nokutare)



## A modern twist on the traditional bento box

The *magewappa* technique of bending cypress or cedar into rounded shapes bound in place with cherry or birch produces lightweight bento boxes that retain moisture and protect the food inside. Combined with designs that highlight the wood grain, these boxes are a timeless favorite. (Photo: PIXTA)



## Elegant woodworking with remarkable techniques

The BUNACO brand was born in Aomori, home to the World Heritage Site of virgin beech forest in the Shirakami-Sanchi mountain range. Crafted into ribbon-like strips, the beechwood is coiled to form plates, dishes and a variety of other products. (Photo: BUNACO)







# Exploring the Fragrances of Wood

*Kodo*, meaning the “way of fragrance,” is as respected in Japan as tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Wood plays an important role in this special art of appreciating incense.

Cooperation and photos: Nippon Kodo Co., Ltd., Koju



Top: Cover your hand lightly above the burner to “listen” to the fragrance. These graceful gestures are part of *kodo* etiquette. (Photo: PIXTA)  
Left: In *kodo*, a combination of six types of incense are used.  
Right: Sandalwood has a woody aroma. In addition to incense, it is also used for carving Buddhist statues and making crafts.

As the culture of scent developed in Japan, it has been inextricably linked with the wood of incense trees. Incense, or *koboku* literally “fragrant wood” in Japanese, is said to have come to Japan with the introduction of Buddhism to the country, and it was initially used to purify the space in front of a Buddhist altar. Starting in the 8th century, aristocrats began burning incense pastilles, a mixture of powdered fragrant wood and other aromatic ingredients, to scent their rooms and clothing. The ceremonial aspect

of burning incense later became popular among samurai. Eventually, the art of appreciating incense and fragrance, became codified as *kodo* in the 16th century.

There are two main type of *koboku* incense used in incense ceremonies: sandalwood and agarwood. From trees in the *Santalaceae* family, sandalwood has a sweet aroma and is used for items associated with Buddhist altars. Agarwood is a tree in the *Thymelaeaceae* family which secretes a resin when cut or felled. This resin, solidified over many years, becomes



1. A *koro* incense burner used in *kodo* ceremonies. A small bit of incense about 2mm square is warmed atop a flake of mica (ore) placed over charcoal ash.  
2. Taking part in *kumiko*, participants “listen” to several types of burning incense to see if they can distinguish the aromatic differences.  
3. Taking a moment to focus intently on a fragrance and what it stirs in you has much in common with meditation.



One of the most famous *kyara* in existence is the Ranjatai. It is held in the Shosoin repository, which houses Imperial treasures dating back to the 8th century. It weighs 11.6kg and measures 156cm in length.



an aromatic substance that emits scent when warmed. Although the fragrance varies from tree to tree, the highest grade of agarwood resin, called *kyara*, has been highly prized since ancient times.

In *kodo*, participants “listen” to the fragrance as they appreciate the aroma of incense warmed in small ceramic burners called *koro*. Each scent’s individual qualities are then described in terms of flavor, perhaps as sweet, sour, or bitter, for example. The incense ceremony also involves

courtly games such as *kumiko*. Participants listen to several different types of incense, describing the aromatic differences and identifying the one related to a specific *waka* poem. Even slight changes in the weather or humidity level can change the fragrance of an incense, making this game quite difficult. The point is not whether one wins or loses, but the pleasure of savoring the scent wafting from a chip of fragrant wood, letting it take your imagination to seasonal pleasures and literary fancy.



## Joys of Japanese Fragrance

Western aromatherapy involves specific notable scents such as rose, lavender, and peppermint — fragrances you recognize instantly when you encounter them. By contrast, the abstract fragrances of incense conjure unique worlds shaped by the emotions they elicit. Since the sense of smell effects all of the other senses, the art of appreciating incense sharpens sight, touch, taste and hearing, as well, enhancing the way the body functions.

Based on conversation with Inagaki Yoshihiro (Koju)





A Virtual Journey  
through Japan

# Trees with Stories

In Japan, many trees are personified and adored, and a number of ancient, massive trees are venerated as gods, because trees are believed to house spirits.



Fukuoka

## Dazaifu Tenmangu Tobiume

Legend has it that when the tragic political and literary figure Sugawara Michizane (845 – 903) was sent from Kyoto to Kyushu, he memorialized the beloved plum tree he left behind in poem, causing the tree to fly to him in Kyushu. This tree, Tobiume (literally, “flying plum”), stands in front of the main Dazaifu Tenmangu shrine where Michizane is enshrined; here, in full spring bloom. (Photo: PIXTA)

Tottori

## Kobara Jinja (Kyaku Jinja) Forest

Nestled quietly amid the rice paddies, this tiny forest captures the imagination like a scene from Studio Ghibli's animated film, *Tonari no Totoro* (“My Neighbor Totoro”). What stands here is actually a small shrine surrounded by pasania, holly, and other massive trees. This spot became a popular destination after being featured on a website. (Photo: Aflo)



Fukushima

## Miharu Takizakura

Miharu Takizakura (waterfall cherry tree), a weeping cherry tree over 1,000 years old, is named for the waterfall-like cascade of flowers that bloom on branches extending from its 13.5-meter high trunk. In recent years, more than 400 descendants — themselves over 200 years old — have been found within a 10km radius of this ancestor tree, and its saplings have traveled far and wide to now bloom around the world. (Photo: PIXTA)



Tochigi

## Lady of Odashirogahara

In this wetland registered under the Ramsar Convention stands a single white birch, called the Lady of Odashirogahara for its elegant poise. The forest, with its myriad of seasonal color, serves as the backdrop for this noble lady as she welcomes the visitors who come back to see her again and again. (Photo: Aflo)



Tokyo

## Yogo no Matsu, Zenyoji Temple

A Japanese black pine over 600 years old, Yogo no Matsu stands eight meters tall. With east-west branches extending about 31 meters and north-south branches extending about 28 meters, this magnificent tree exudes a divinity befitting its name, Yogo (which means “the gods and Buddha reveal themselves”). (Photo: PIXTA)



Shizuoka

## Miho no Matsubara

A spectacularly scenic spot of white sand and green pine trees, Miho no Matsubara is registered as part of a Mt. Fuji World Cultural Heritage site. The well-known legend of the fisherman who found a celestial maiden's robe of feathers hung in the trees in Miho no Matsubara and asked for a dance before he would return it, is also the subject of a Noh performance. (Photo: photolibrary)



Gifu

## Jingu Birin

Ise Jingu in Mie Prefecture is the most important shrine in all of Japan. Every 20 years, the shrine's divine palace is rebuilt, and the Shikinen Sengu ceremony is held to mark this renewal. The cypress featured in this ceremony comes from Jingu Birin, a natural forest in the mountains of Gifu. Given time to grow with as little human intervention as possible, the trees of this forest grow up strong and beautiful. (Photo: Tono Forest Management Office)



Kagoshima

## Yakushima Jomon Sugi

Estimated at between 2,000 and 4,000 years old, with a trunk circumference of 16.4 meters and a root circumference of 43 meters, this is the largest of the Japanese cedars native to Yakushima island and appears to be the oldest. The tree is thought to have developed its stocky shape to withstand the frequent typhoons that hit the island. It was registered as a natural World Heritage site in 1993. (Photo: Takahira Yuuki)

Wakayama

## Kumano Kodo Daimonzaka no Okusu

A World Heritage site, Kumano Kodo is a pilgrimage route travelled by countless worshippers for more than a thousand years. The thick growth of trees gives the mountainous Nakahechi trail section of the route a particularly sacred air, with the 800-year-old Okusu (Sacred Camphor Laurel) standing at the Daimonzaka entrance to welcome pilgrims. (Photo: PIXTA)





# Matsutake

## A Fragrant Gift from the Forest

Photos: Arai Akiko

*Matsutake* is a mushroom that grows at the base of pine trees. In Japan, it is found primarily in forests of Japanese Red Pine. Of the many mushrooms that grace the dining table here, there is none quite as special as the *matsutake*.

In Japanese cuisine, great importance is placed on the aroma of the food. *Matsutake* is singularly loved for its unique sweet fragrance, which comes from the octenol, or mushroom alcohol, that it contains. *Matsutake* is seen as the king of autumn delicacies, so people all over Japan hope to get a taste of it at least once before winter comes. Since *matsutake* quickly loses freshness and cannot be cultivated, it is a highly sought-after, relatively expensive treat.

This mushroom has been greatly prized since ancient times. *Matsutake* are listed among the gifts to the Emperor noted in an 8<sup>th</sup>-century history book. During the Edo period (1603–1868), people could even pay

their taxes in *matsutake*. Villages strictly controlled the harvesting of this mushroom. Permission was required to buy or sell it, even for the owners of the land where it grew.

Environmental changes in today's forests have inevitably affected the *matsutake* harvest. Long ago, the mushroom's host tree, the Japanese Red Pine, was used for firewood and charcoal in Japan, which meant these forests were cared for regularly by local communities who depended on them. This maintenance created a suitable environment for the *matsutake*, which prefers sunny, well-ventilated areas. Since the 1970s, however, when petroleum became the fuel of choice, mountain forests have not been maintained as carefully, which is one reason for the sad decline in *matsutake* yields.

In Japanese cuisine, *matsutake* is grilled simply or cooked with rice to highlight its wonderful fragrance and flavor. Miyanami Yuzuru, owner of

## Grilled Matsutake

The best way to enjoy the pure taste of the *matsutake* is to grill it whole. When fresh, these mushrooms contain plenty of moisture—each bite bursts with aromatic, juicy flavor.



## Dobin Mushi

*Matsutake*, shrimp, and other ingredients steamed in broth in a small earthenware pot called *dobin*. Enjoy each morsel between sips of the broth infused with *umami* flavor and aroma. Add a squeeze of *sudachi* (Japanese green citrus fruit) to really bring out the *umami*.



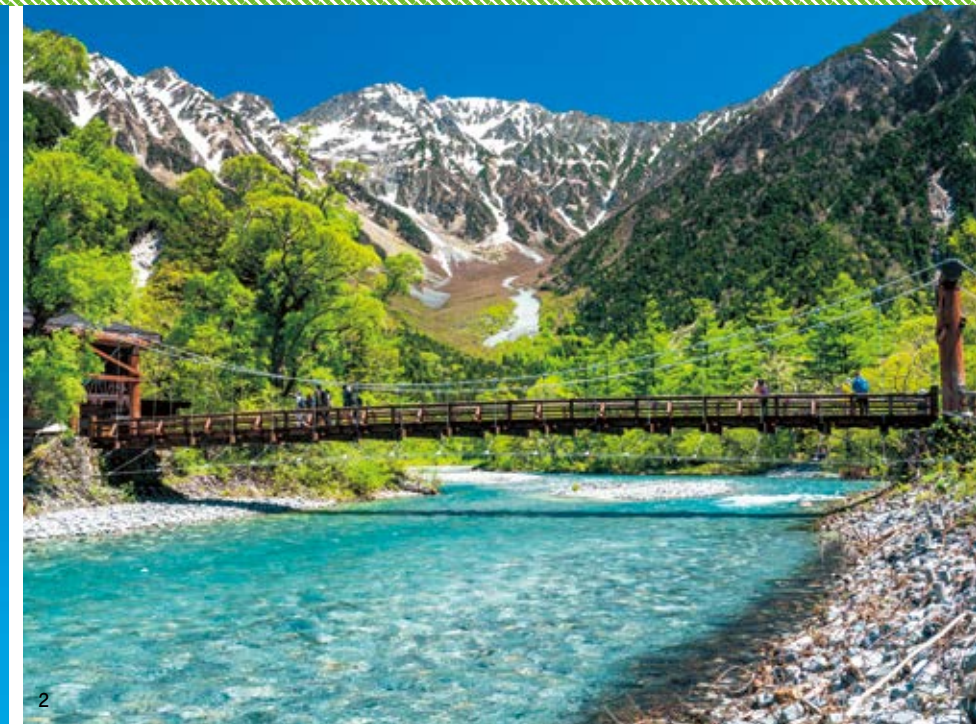
Top: *Matsutake* with caps completely unopened are thought to be more fragrant, and are therefore preferred.  
Bottom: Akasaka Matsubaya, a restaurant specializing in *matsutake* and Hida Wagyu beef, procures and serves the finest quality *matsutake*.

## Matsutake Gohan

*Matsutake* and rice simply cooked in broth and soy sauce. Slice the mushrooms into small pieces, but be sure to preserve a cross-section of the original mushroom shape. This special combination of *shinmai* (newly harvested rice) and *matsutake* is only available in the autumn.







An artisanal city in the foothills of Japan's Northern Alps

# Matsumoto

Surrounded by mountains, time passes tranquilly through the crisp, clear air of Matsumoto, a city with a time-honored culture of craftsmanship.

Photos: Osaka Satoshi, Aflo, PIXTA



1. Matsumoto Castle, with its 30-meter-high castle keep. On a clear day, this spot offers beautiful views with the northern Alps in the background.
2. One of Japan's famed mountain resorts, Kamikochi is a one-hour bus ride from the center of Matsumoto. Car traffic is restricted to protect the natural environment.
3. Kaichi School opened as an elementary school in the late 19th century in this building. Constructed in 1876, the building was used as a school until 1963. (Photo: Matsumoto City Board of Education; closed until autumn 2024 due to retrofitting)
4. Works of art by Kusama Yayoi welcome visitors to the Matsumoto City Museum of Art. (Photo: Matsumoto City Museum of Art)





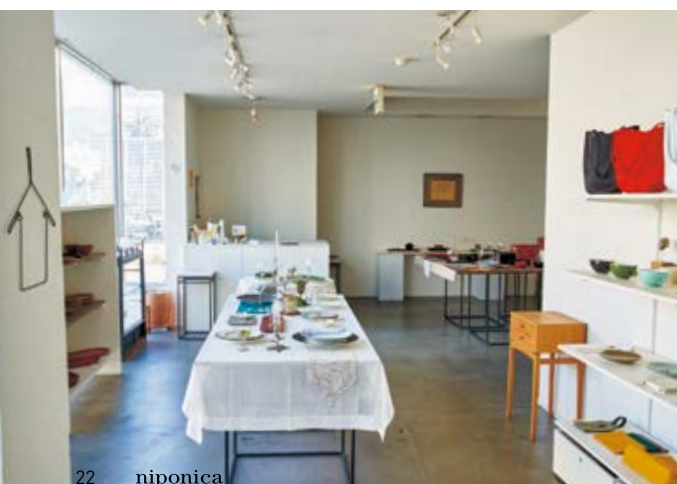
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7. Launched in 1985, Craft Fair Matsumoto attracts crowds of visitors to see not only the woodworking on display, but also pottery, glasswork, and textiles. (Photo: Matsumoto Craft Promotion Association)

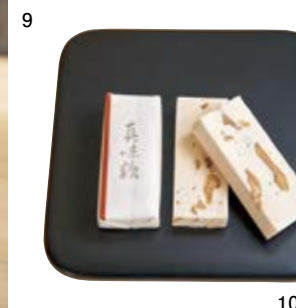
8. Galerie Kaigetsu offers an array of goods made both locally and across Japan. Right: The *shuki* (sake set) crafted in lacquered paulownia wood, a staple of the gallery, is a handy piece of lightweight everyday tableware. Left: Among the most popular items, these beautifully dyed bags made by local artists feel wonderful in the hand.

Just two and a half hours from the center of Tokyo by limited express, the train windows offer picturesque views of the beautiful Northern Alps of Japan. Completely enveloped by mountains, this gem of Nagano Prefecture, Matsumoto, is situated at the very center of the Japanese archipelago in an area that includes the popular alpine tourist destination, Kamikochi. With rivers running through the city center, an abundance of spring water from mountain runoff, and wells scattered throughout the area, the rich natural environment gives the city a clear, fresh air.

Matsumoto Castle, built at the end of the 16th century and now named a National Treasure, stands as a symbol of the city's long history of prosperity as a commercial center conveniently located for transporting goods. Featuring the oldest existing five-story castle keep in Japan and a surrounding moat, the castle is a wonderful spot to appreciate the beauty of each season. To its north stands the former Kaichi School building, built in the late 19th century. This important historical site, which was constructed by



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9. Cohiludo is a popular restaurant that adds its own modern touch to the traditional *oyaki*. A great place to enjoy *oyaki* stuffed with Nozawana pickles, the restaurant's specialty, or with cheese, apples, and many other ingredients.

10. A long-established traditional sweets shop, Kaiun-do dates back to 1884. Its signature sweet, *shinmito*, is a Japanese-style nougat made of sugar, honey, and walnuts.

11. Kissa Marumo is a coffee shop whose interior was designed with the help of the originator of the Matsumoto folk craft furniture style. People stop in for the shop's original coffee blend, as well as its delicious homemade pudding.

local carpenters, features a blend of Japanese and Western architecture and recalls Japan's period of modernization.

Matsumoto is blessed with an abundance of high-quality timber, and furniture making has been popular here since the Edo period (1603–1868). Although the industry fell into decline for a time, it underwent a revival in the 1940s with the rise of the Japanese Folk Crafts Movement, which sought to preserve and pass on handicraft techniques for practical everyday objects. Matsumoto folk craft furniture integrates the quality and sturdiness of Japanese furniture with the curved lines of Western furniture. Its muted reddish brown shine, achieved with layers of varnish or lacquer carefully applied to Japanese cherry birch wood, is still cherished today.

In recent years, Matsumoto has also come to be known as a city of arts and crafts. The Matsumoto City Museum of Art, where the works of native avant-garde artist Kusama Yayoi are on permanent display, is a prime example.

Crafts Fair Matsumoto, an annual market held in May that attracts pottery and woodwork artists and craft enthusiasts from all over Japan, has also become a must-visit scene amid the city's lush greenery in springtime. Matsumoto is also home to a number of discerning independent galleries and shops offering high-end designs, so be sure to look through the selection to find your favorites.

When hunger strikes, try *oyaki*, a traditional local bun made of a wheat-based dough stuffed with paste made with vegetables or fruit. A stop for souvenirs at one of the city's old and established snack shops is another fun way to pass the time. Tired feet will also appreciate a leisurely break at Marumo, a coffee shop with a nostalgic retro decor featuring Matsumoto folk craft tables and chairs.

Matsumoto retains the feel of a historic castle town, but it never feels old. Visitors are sure to enjoy the special charm of its blend of traditional and contemporary craft culture thriving amid the verdant natural surroundings.



## Map of Matsumoto Area

- ① Matsumoto Castle
- ② Former Kaichi School
- ③ Matsumoto City Museum of Art
- ④ Matsumoto Folk Craft Furniture Central Showroom
- ⑤ Galerie Kaigetsu
- ⑥ Cohiludo
- ⑦ Kaiun-do
- ⑧ Kissa Marumo

• Access  
From Shinjuku Station, Matsumoto Station is about 2.5 hours by limited express on the JR Chuo Line.

• Contact information  
Visit Matsumoto  
The Official Travel Guide of Matsumoto, Nagano, Japan  
<https://visitmatsumoto.com/>





Souvenirs of



Japan 23

Practical Beauty Adds Color to Life

# Bamboo Baskets

Photos: Matsushita Jiro

Bamboo grows quickly and remains green even during the cold months, so is thought to be auspicious, along with pine and plum trees. The bamboo motif has been used in Japanese paintings and crafts since ancient times. Outside of art, baskets woven from finely split strands of bamboo called *higo* have also long been a handy tool for people working in the fields and kitchens.

Today, more and more people are bringing these bamboo baskets back into their lives. Not only are they practical; their handmade warmth and intriguing designs make them a wonderful accent for any

interior. Where and how you use them, and which shape of basket you choose, is up to you. Set them next to each other for a decorative touch that doubles as storage space. Highlight the basket handles as *objet d'art* in themselves. Use them as trays to hold dishware. Or carry them as a summer carryall to make a real fashion statement.

The appeal of Japanese bamboo baskets is found in the variety of sophisticated weave patterns they are available in. Find your favorite at a specialty store or variety shop in any Japanese neighborhood you visit. You'll surely cherish it as a treasure.

Upper left: Light passing through the green bamboo can make a space look and feel cooler.

Bottom left: Use to carry soy sauce and other condiments to the table.

Upper right: Simply placing a piece of cloth in some basketware creates a beautiful *objet d'art*.

Bottom right: *Ajiro-ami* twill with an intersecting diagonal pattern (left) and *sukashi-ami* open weave