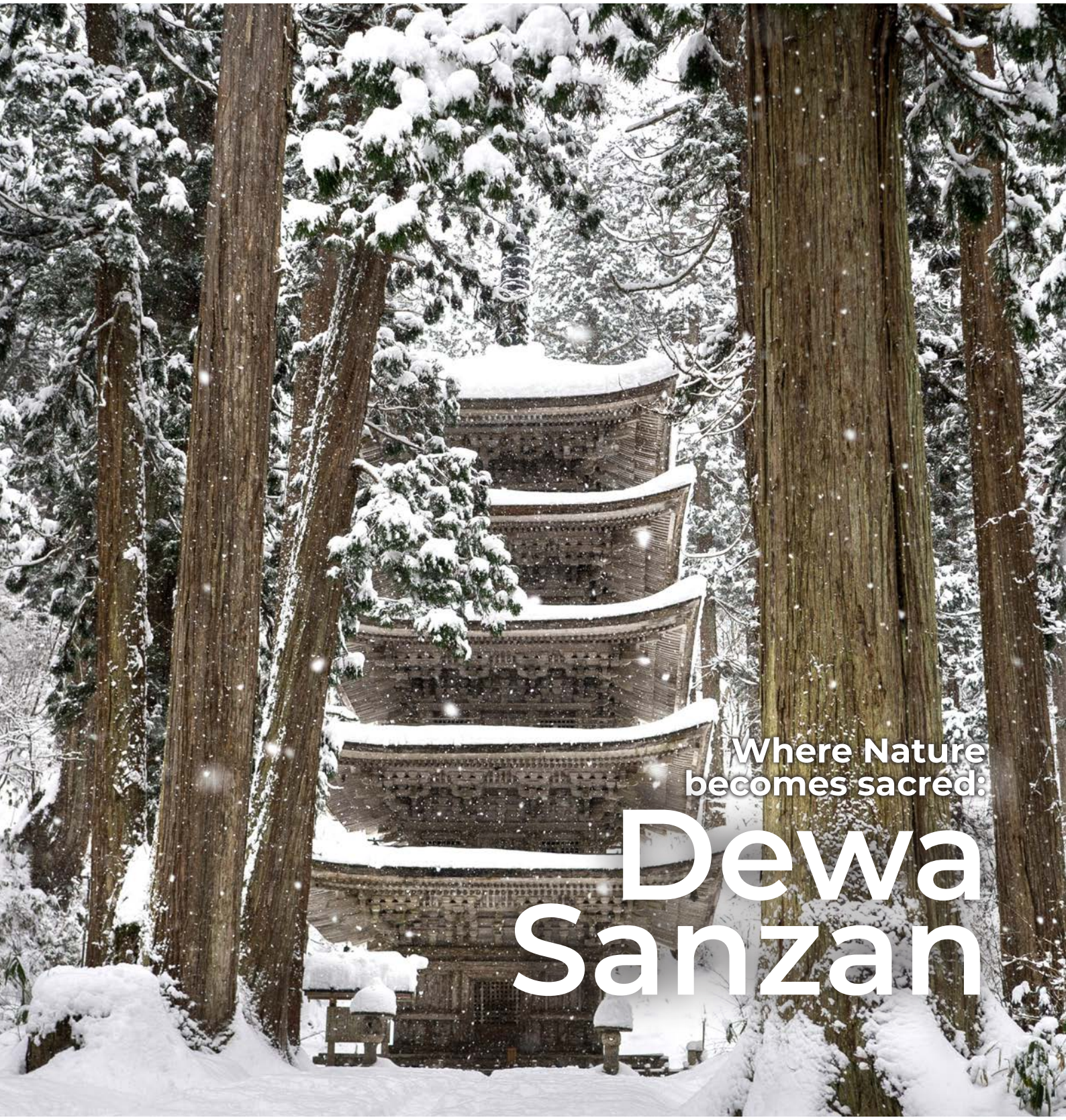
TSURUOKA

THE RAW BEAUTY OF JAPAN, UNSEEN



Where Nature becomes sacred:

Dewa Sanzan

Japan's first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy

Dewa Sanzan refers to three sacred mountains, forming one of the most important centers of Shugendo — a spiritual tradition over 1,400 years old, where mountains are not simply revered, but lived as a path of transformation.

A pilgrimage through time: past, present, and future

DEWA SANZAN

Where Nature becomes faith...

MT. HAGURO

414 m above sea level

Open year-round 90 min up, 1h down ★★☆☆☆ Moderate physical effort (stone stair ascent)

The smallest of the sacred triad, Mt. Haguro represents the World of the Present — where prayers are offered for life as it is today, and for the fulfillment of one's deepest wishes. Its 2,446 stone steps wind through a centuries-old cedar forest, leading to the Dewa Sanzan Shrine, where the deities of all three mountains are enshrined. Just nearby, connected by a vermilion corridor, Saikan — a former pilgrims' lodge — welcomes visitors and, by reservation, serves a Shinto-inspired version of shojin ryori, traditional Buddhist ritual cuisine.

Reached in about an hour on foot, the ascent also reveals the iconic Five-Story Pagoda, a National Treasure, along with a scattering of Shinto shrines and Buddhist remains hidden deep within the forest — a journey beyond time, into the spiritual foundations of Japan.

For those seeking a deeper experience, it is possible to spend the night in a traditional pilgrim lodging (shukubo), hosted by the yamabushi priests of Mt. Haguro.

MT. GASSAN

1984 m above sea level

From July 1 to September 15 3.5h up / 3.5h down

★★★★☆ Challenging (3 ladder sections down to Mt. Yudono), moderate if returning to the 8th station

The highest peak of Dewa Sanzan, Mt. Gassan represents the World of the Past.
In the pilgrimage's cosmology, it is where prayers are offered for the souls of the departed and for the rebirth of ancestors.
At the 8th station, it is said that 33 high-altitude marshes are inhabited by the presence of Amida Nyorai, the Buddha of the Pure Land.
Designated as a Special Protection Zone within Bandai-Asahi National Park, Mt. Gassan is renowned for its rare alpine flora and the wildlife it shelters, including the Japanese ermine.
Exposed to Siberian winds blowing in from the Sea of Japan, it experiences some of the heaviest snowfall in the country.

MT. YUDONO

Approximately 1500 m above sea level

June 1 to November 3

1h on site / 4h from Mt. Gassan / 2 days via the Rokujurigoe Kaido

★☆☆☆☆ Easy (shrine visit) from Yudonosan Senninzawa

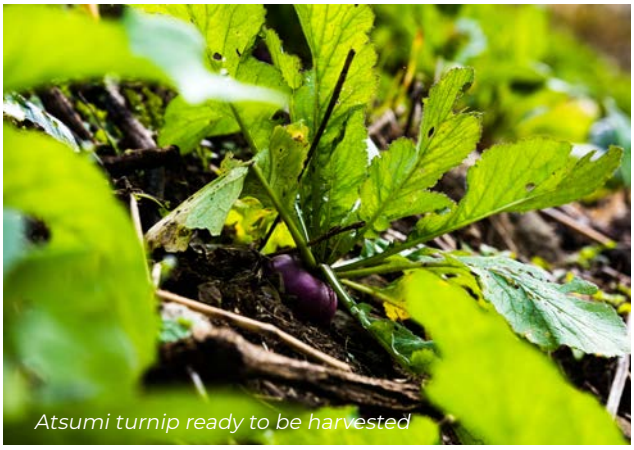
A sacred site of Shingon Buddhism, Mt. Yudono represents the World of the Future in the pilgrimage's cosmology — a place where prayers are offered for one's future reincarnations and those of departed loved ones. Mt. Yudono was once a place of ascetic practice for the sokushinbutsu monks, who sought enlightenment through the self-mummification of their bodies. It also drew the poet Matsuo Bashō during his journey described in The Narrow Road to the Deep North, where he composed two haiku inspired by the site.

Mt. Yudono can also be reached on foot via the ancient Rokujurigoe Kaido pilgrimage route, which has connected the "Mountain of the Future" to the communities of Yamagata Prefecture for over 1,200 years.

Here, the seasons shape the meal

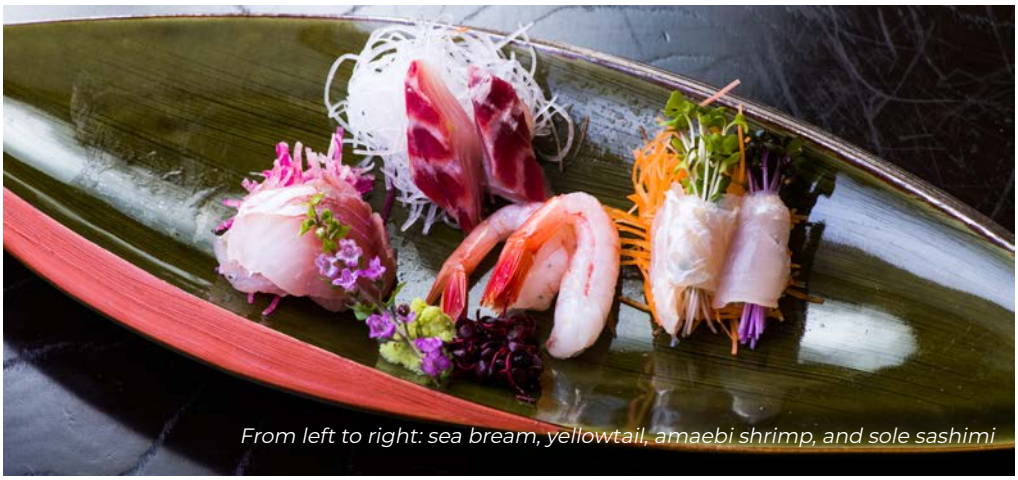
Dewa Sanzan's shojin-ryori

Japan's First UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy



Atsumi turnip ready to be harvested

Atsumi-kabu: pink turnip pickles



From left to right: sea bream, yellowtail, amaebi shrimp, and sole sashimi

It is said that the mountains share their blessings with the plains and the sea, as snowmelt from Mt. Gassan flows down, carrying nutrients through the land before reaching the ocean.
In Tsuruoka, the cuisine reflects a deep reverence for the sacred mountains of Dewa Sanzan, highlighting wild mountain vegetables, fresh fish and seafood, and produce from the plains — all nourished by the minerals carried down from the peaks.

A seasonal guide to Tsuruoka's cuisine:

Shonai Shrine during the Shonai Taisai Festival (early October)

Chido Museum seen from Tsuruoka Park in mid April

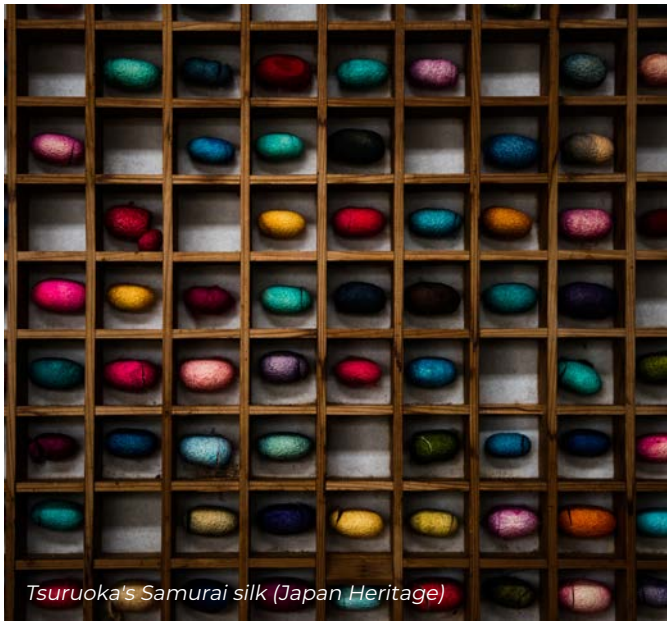
WHERE NATURE SHAPES THE SPIRIT OF WARRIORS

In the heart of Tsuruoka, Shonai Shrine watches over the legacy of the Sakai family, former lords of the Shonai clan.
It stands on the site of their former castle, destroyed in the aftermath of the Boshin War in 1868.

Though the walls have vanished, the spirit remains. Around this stronghold, these once unfolded a refined castle town (jokamachi), which urban design reflected the moral and political order of the Shonai clan — shaped by the region's harsh natural environment.
In spring, the 730 cherry trees of Tsuruoka Park veil the former moats in soft shades of pink. Listed among Japan's "Top 100 Cherry Blossom Spots," the park embodies a spirit of renewal, where the fleeting beauty of sakura marks the end of winter's austerity.
Across the park, the Chido Museum preserves the material heritage of the former Dewa Province: armor, swords, horse saddles, and ritual objects. Each piece reveals a society where martial discipline, civic responsibility, and scholarly culture coexisted in rare balance — even in this rural region shaped by a demanding natural environment. Not far from the museum, the Art Forum hosts a wide range of temporary exhibitions, offering visitors new perspectives on art and culture in Tsuruoka.

Just a short walk away, the former clan school Chidokan, founded on the Confucian teachings of Ogyu Sorai, reflects the Shonai clan's belief that education was the true foundation of power — to cultivate the mind before wielding the sword.
Nearby, the Shogin TACT Tsuruoka stands as a striking example of contemporary architecture that blends harmoniously with Tsuruoka's former castle town (*jokamachi*), and today serves as a cultural hub for the city.

Today, Shonai Shrine remains an important place for the local community, where gratitude is expressed toward the former lords for the culture they left behind.



Tsuruoka's Samurai silk (Japan Heritage)

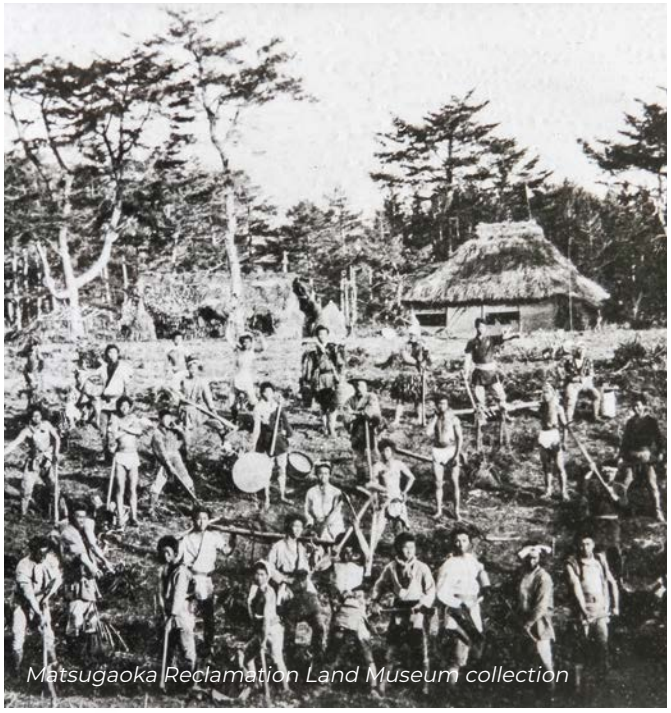
FROM SWORDS TO SICKLES: THE LEGACY OF THE "LAST SAMURAI"

Year-round 1 h

Following the defeat of their powerful allies, the Aizu-Wakamatsu clan, the Shonai clan was the last to lay down its arms at the end of the Boshin War. In recognition of their strategic excellence and honorable surrender, they were granted rare clemency, along with the opportunity to pursue a new and noble path: sericulture. Former samurai set out to clear the land in Matsugaoka, planting mulberry trees and raising silkworms.

This marked a profound transformation, from the art of war to the art of silk.

To this day, "Samurai Silk" is produced entirely in Tsuruoka. From silkworm rearing to spinning, dyeing, and final weaving, each step remains rooted in Matsugaoka. Visiting the sericulture farms offers a glimpse into the story of Japan's "last samurai," who transformed adversity into refinement. Here, nature was not an obstacle, but an ally, offering former warriors a new path in harmony with their philosophy.



Matsugaoka Reclamation Land Museum collection

Matsugaoka Reclamation Lands

Where Nature soothes the body

YUNOHAMA ONSEN

According to legend, Yunohama Onsen dates back to the 11th century, when a fisherman discovered an injured turtle healing in hot springs bubbling up along the shoreline.

Just a few minutes away, Zenpoji Temple is dedicated to the Dragon God, guardian of the waters and healer of illness.
In the temple's pond, "human-faced carp" are said to dwell, believed to be incarnations of the deity.

Ranked among the three main Soto Zen temples in Japan, Zenpoji embodies a deep harmony between spirituality and nature, where sailors and fishermen from across northern Japan come to pray for protection and abundant catches.

YURA ONSEN

According to legend, Prince Hachiko, founder of the Dewa Sanzan, was shipwrecked in one of the caves of Yura Onsen in the 6th century while fleeing his father's assassins. Rescued by eight young women, he shared the bounty of the sea with them, regaining his strength before continuing his journey to Mt. Haguro.

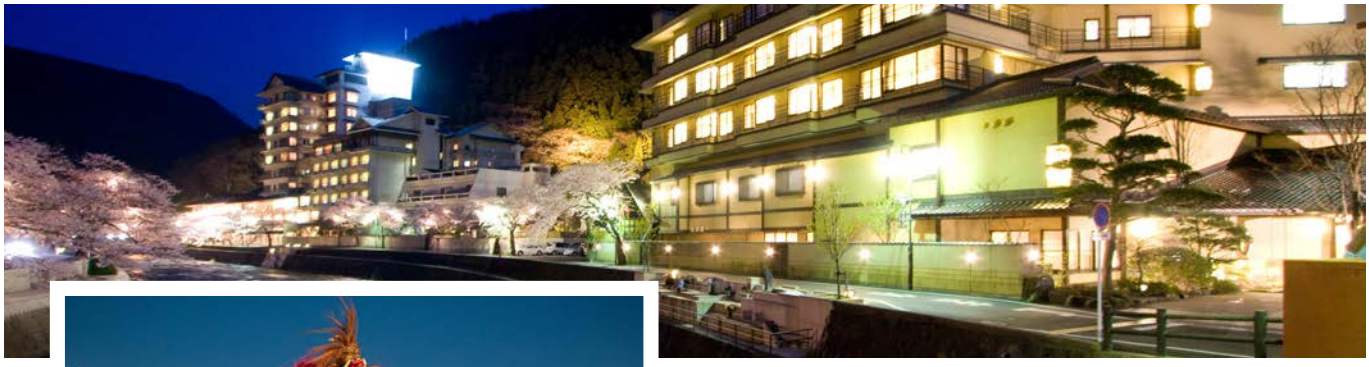
Today, Yura offers stand-up paddleboarding and kayaking along its coastline, allowing visitors to explore these legendary caves, home to thousands of endangered bats (Miniopterus fuliginosus). The area also offers fishing in local ponds, visits to Hakusanjima Island and its shrine, as well as Kihi Shrine in the hamlet of Sanze.

YUTAGAWA ONSEN

Yutagawa Onsen, located at the foot of Mt. Kinbo, has existed for over 1,300 years. Once valued as medicinal hot springs by pilgrims traveling through the lands of Dewa, its waters are still known today for their soothing, anti-inflammatory properties. They can be enjoyed in intimate ryokan, often featuring small private baths.

In spring, the surrounding area is covered with moso bamboo, whose young shoots are used in moso-jiru, a local soup and seasonal specialty emblematic of Tsuruoka and the hot spring village of Yutagawa.

From spring to autumn, Mt. Kinbo offers a rewarding yet demanding hike. Winding through cedar forests, the trail leads to Kinbo Shrine, designated an Important Cultural Property of Japan, a discreet yet meaningful testament to the region's deep spiritual heritage.



ATSUMI ONSEN

Atsumi Onsen, located south of Tsuruoka, is an ideal stop between the Shonai region and the city of Niigata. With a history spanning over 1,200 years, it traces its origins to the legend of an injured crane that came to heal in the hot springs emerging along the Atsumi River.

Its proximity to the Sea of Japan also makes it a prime spot to witness the Nezugaseki fish auctions in the late afternoon. There is no need to rise at dawn: the day's catch, brought in from the waters off Tsuruoka, is shipped to Tsukiji and other major markets the following morning, leaving visitors with the rare privilege of seeing the fish at its absolute freshest the evening before.

Yet Atsumi is also a land of mountains steeped in mystical folklore. In the hamlet of Yamairagawa, known for its Yamato-style Noh theatre, the community gathers at Kawachi Shrine on May 3 and November 23 to celebrate performances of solemn Noh and lively Kabuki, where people drink, shout, and laugh, carrying on a tradition devoted to communing with the gods.

Where Nature becomes art

South of Tsuruoka, the hamlet of Sekikawa is known for shinaori, an ancient weaving tradition dating back to the Jomon period (c. 10,000 BCE–300 CE), made from fibers of linden tree bark, one of Japan's oldest textiles.

The bark is harvested by men, then boiled and softened by women before being spun and woven. This durable material is used to create sandals, bags, umbrellas, and even clothing, its natural strength ensuring the longevity of each piece.

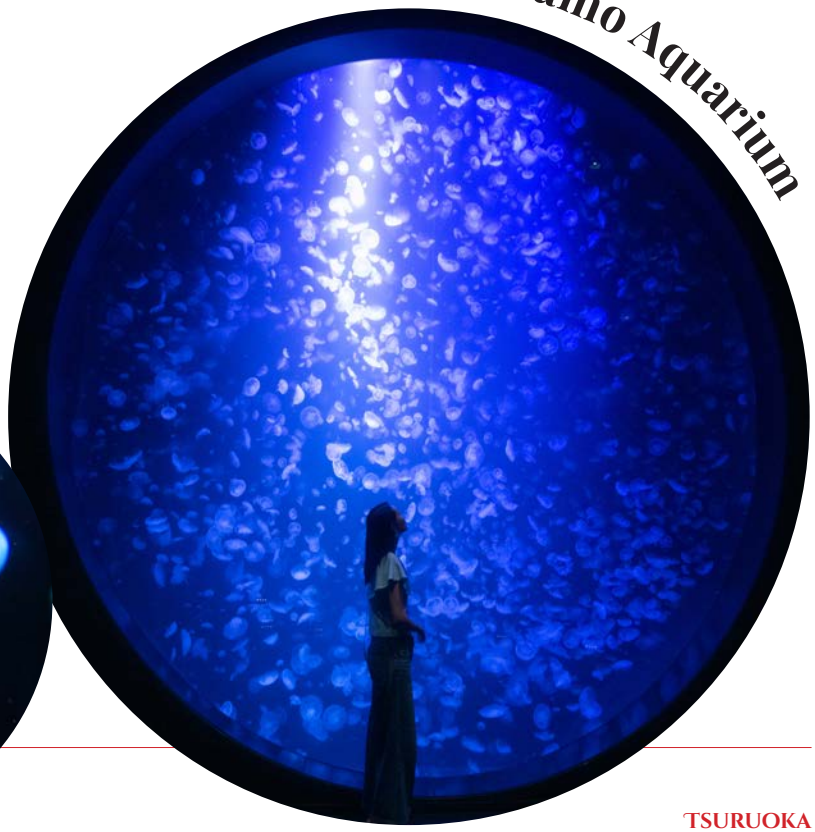
This division of labor reflects a way of life shaped by the local environment, where forest resources have long provided everyday necessities, including clothing.

Today, this craftsmanship is still passed down among the women of the Atsumi region. Visitors can observe their work or take part in a workshop at the Shinaori Center in Sekikawa.

Tsuruoka also offers the opportunity to discover other local crafts, such as hand-painted erosoku candles, Shonai sashiko embroidery, and decorative woven gotenmari balls.

Kamo Aquarium

Kamo Aquarium showcases around one hundred species of jellyfish raised on site, making it home to the world's greatest diversity of jellyfish.
In the large tank dedicated to Aurelia aurita, more than 10,000 specimens drift in slow, circular motion under soft lighting, offering a calm and continuous viewing experience. Beyond the spectacle, the aquarium aims to foster a deeper connection between local communities and marine life — encouraging visitors to see it not merely as a source of food, but as a collection of unique living beings.



Where Nature pushes you further

In the Asahi region, snow shapes not only the landscape, but also the way people live and explore.

On the slopes of Mt. Yudono, Yudonosan Ski Park is known for its abundant powder, brought by cold Siberian winds that break against Mt. Gassan. Popular among Japanese snowboarders for its varied terrain and natural features, it offers an authentic experience, far from large, standardized resorts.

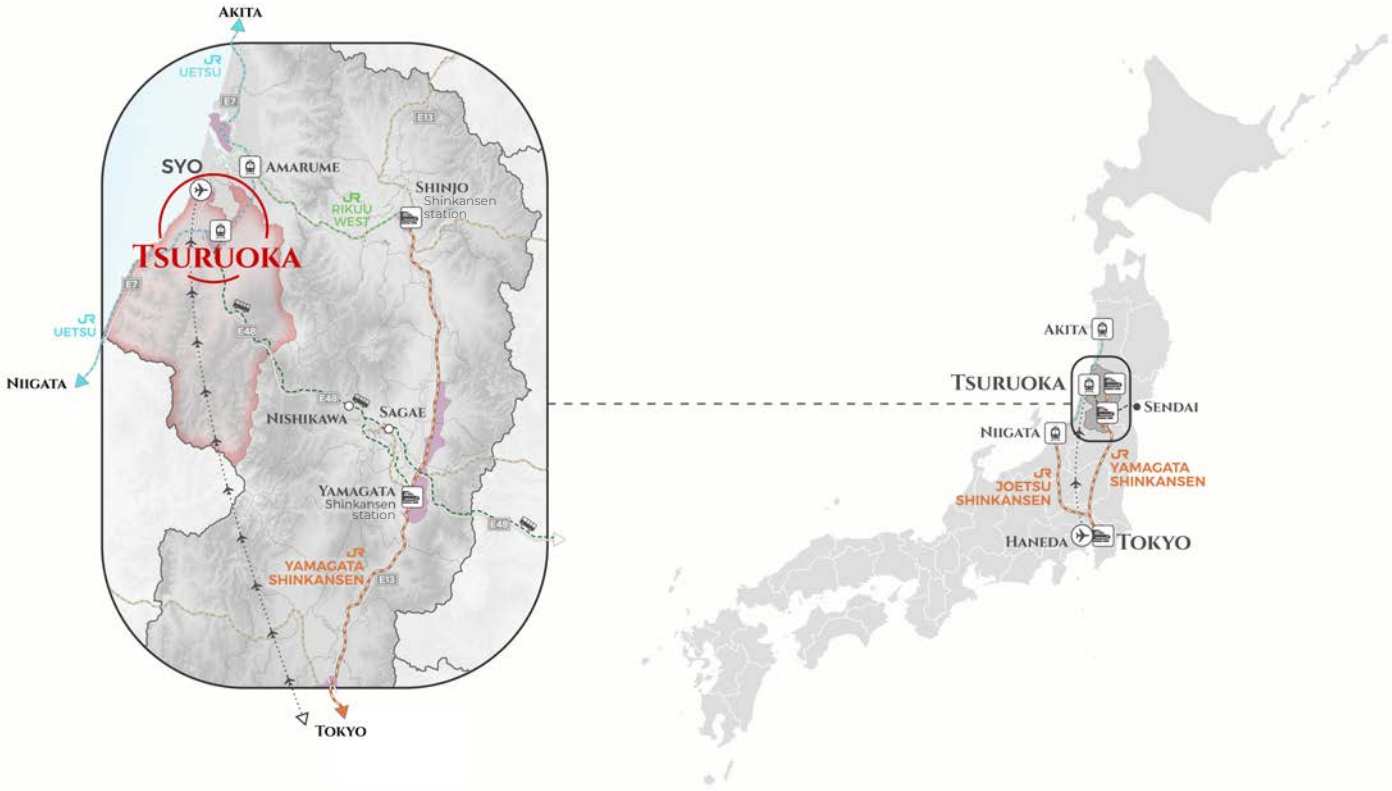
Around Mt. Haguro, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing provide a quieter way to discover the dormant wildlife and landscapes of Bandai-Asahi National Park, home to the sacred mountains of Dewa Sanzan.

Yet here, winter is more than a backdrop, it is a challenge. Long periods of isolation and scarce harvests gave rise to an ingenious culinary tradition based on *hozonshoku*, or "preserved foods," where fermentation, drying, and salting made it possible to endure the harshest months.

This demanding environment also shaped a distinctive spirituality. On Mt. Yudono, some monks undertook the extreme ascetic practice of *sokushinbutsu*, a process of self-mummification aimed at becoming a Buddha in this lifetime, believed to protect local communities from famine and disease brought on by the cold.

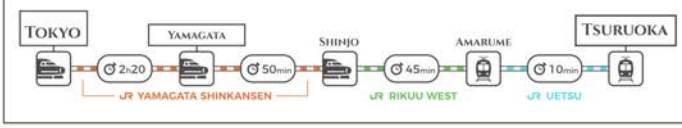
For winter trip ideas in Tsuruoka and in other seasons:

How to reach Tsuruoka



From Yamagata & Tokyo

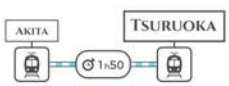
By Shinkansen & local train



By air

Fastest route from Tokyo

From Akita



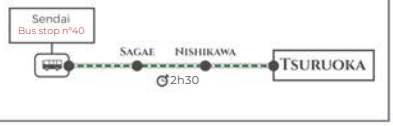
From Niigata & Tokyo

By Shinkansen & local train

Fastest route from Tokyo (by train)

From Sendai

By bus via Sagae & Nishikawa



From Yamagata

By bus via Nishikawa

Fastest route from Yamagata city

Discover a hidden side of Japan, far from the crowds:

www.tsuruokacity.com

Brochure produced by DEGAM Tsuruoka Tourism Bureau for the Tourism Products Department, Tsuruoka City Office, March 2026.