

Although places like the Tomioka Silk Mill and the Katakura Silk Museum display old factory machines, to see the machines in operation you will have to tour the Usui Seishi factory. The tour begins in the upper floor of the factory, where the silk cocoons are delivered. Cocoons come from all over Japan. In response to the way the silk reeling industry has shrunk since its heyday, the factory preserves and displays bags marked with the brands of other, now out-of-business silk reeling factories. On the same floor are informational boards that give a simple explanation of the steps in the reeling process in both English and Japanese. Heading down one floor, visitors can see where the cocoons are dried and placed into storage. An adjacent building stores the cocoons, which are delivered to the sorting rooms by conveyor belts before being sorted and reeled. One of the few processes that has not been automated is the sorting of the cocoons. Experienced factory workers deftly remove cocoons with blemishes, holes, or those that contain multiple pupae.

The cocoons head to the boiler to be softened, and then it's on to the automated reeling machine. The machines automatically pull out the filament from the cocoons and reel it into a thread. Depending on the quality of the cocoons, the thread might snag or break. When this happens, it is the worker's job to fix the thread and restart the reeling process. The first steam-powered models brought to Japan from France required a lot of man-power: every pair of reeled thread had to be carefully watched by a "factory girl." With modern machines, however, just a single person can monitor over 120 reeling threads at once. There is little to no waste, as the damaged cocoons, sericin and *frison*, and even the pupae are all processed and sold as well. At the end of the tour, some of the different varieties of silk are on display, and occasionally these can be purchased.