

## **Gokayama – UNESCO World Heritage Sites**

Some of the most notable sites in Nanto are the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Gokayama, an area characterized by its mountainous terrain and cut through by the Sho River that runs down to the Sea of Japan. The villages of Gokayama are located in remote valleys surrounded by mountains. Because of the limited access, the isolated area cultivated a unique culture, which has been passed down through the generations to this day.

Gokayama is home to 40 villages, including the UNESCO World Heritage *gassho-zukuri* villages of Ainokura and Suganuma, renowned for their traditional houses characterized by steep thatched roofs. Including nearby Shirakawa-go village, this area once counted at least 1,850 *gassho*-style structures, although fewer than 200 remain standing. To this day, there are still people in Ainokura and Suganuma living in traditional *gassho-zukuri* houses.

Two villages in Gokayama were designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1995 along with Shirakawa-go's Ogimachi village in nearby Gifu Prefecture. These villages were recognized as part of Japan's cultural and natural heritage that needed to be preserved and protected. The designation was made official at the 19th UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Berlin, when they were added to the catalogue under the name "Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama – Traditional Houses in the Gassho Style," consisting of the three historic settlements including Ogimachi in Shirakawa-go and both Ainokura and Suganuma, located in Gokayama, Nanto.

The villages met two of the six requirements to be considered a cultural heritage property: they have architecture representative of a period of importance, and they are traditional villages that are at risk of disappearing.

The area is known for its cherry blossoms in spring, while in summer the mountains and rice paddies turn a vivid green. Autumn is a popular time as well, as the red and yellow foliage on the mountains is striking. In winter, the Gokayama area receives as much as

2–3 meters of snow. The pristine snowfall in a landscape dotted with *gassho-zukuri* houses makes for a memorable view of Gokayama's villages.