

## Ainokura Village

The *gassho-zukuri* (steep thatched roof style) village of Ainokura is one of two UNESCO World Heritage Sites located within Gokayama. The larger of the two villages, Ainokura is home to 20 traditional *gassho-zukuri* houses. Most of these houses were built one or two centuries ago; however, some of the oldest structures date back as far as the seventeenth century. Today, some of these *gassho-zukuri* are still occupied by local residents, while others have been transformed into museums, shops and lodgings for visitors.

Ainokura is nestled in a high mountain valley, enclosed by mountains, and situated near the west bank of the Sho River. Vegetation and trees including horse chestnut, beech, and Mongolian oak grow behind the village and act as protection against avalanches. Mulberries were once raised for silk production, and a type of mulberry known as *kozo* is cultivated for the production of washi paper. With the decline of sericulture, washi papermaking, and saltpeter production, agricultural fields have been converted into rice paddies. Other crops, including *kariyasu*, a variety of miscanthus that is used for thatching, are grown in a separate area some distance from the village.

Aside from the 20 preserved *gassho-zukuri* houses, Ainokura is home to some other notable traditional structures. These are organized into categories including *gassho-zukuri* houses remodeled into two-story buildings, wooden structures not classified under the *gassho* style, plank-style and earthen storehouses, and religious buildings, including a temple, a shrine, and a Buddhist dojo training hall. The village is worth a visit in any season as the area is renowned for its spectacular nature and foliage, although it's particularly stunning in winter when the houses are covered in snow and illuminated with lights.

Ainokura is easily walkable, with the majority of buildings located within a short distance of each other. Head up the neighboring slope to find a lookout point from which you can see a panoramic view of the village. Visitors will find many attractions in the village itself, including the Ainokura Folklore Museum and the Ainokura

Traditional Industries Museum. There are also shops as well as *gassho-zukuri* inns. Other activities include a washi papermaking workshop, where visitors can enjoy a hands-on experience of this traditional craft, as well as learning about the history behind Gokayama's washi paper industry.