

【Building the Spectator Boats】

Gifu City Boatyard for Ukai Spectator Boats

The spectator boats that carry sightseers to watch the cormorant fishing on the Nagara River are made at a single boatyard on the southern bank just east of Nagara Bridge. The facility has been in operation since 1927, when the city took over the construction and maintenance of the spectator boats. The craftsmen continue to use traditional boatbuilding techniques, and at most only two new vessels are built each year. The boatyard is open to the public, and visitors can view the boats under construction. It is open on weekdays from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., except during the year-end and New-Year holidays.

Traditional Construction Methods

Like the skills of cormorant masters, the techniques for making traditional wooden vessels have been preserved over the centuries by boat builders living along the Nagara River. The spectator boats come in a variety of sizes and can hold anywhere from 15 to 50 passengers.

The boats are constructed from Japanese umbrella pine, which is lightweight and water-resistant. The lumber used by the craftsmen must measure at least 4 meters by 40 centimeters and must be taken from trees that are at least 130 years old. The trees are found in forests ranging from the Tōnō area of Gifu Prefecture to the Kiso region of Nagano Prefecture. A single tree produces about 10 planks.

The boards must be dried for about one year before they can be used. Once seasoned, they are joined with large iron nails called *funakugi*. The *funakugi* are handcrafted specifically for the spectator boats and come in several sizes. Every step in the construction process—from shaping the boat's curvature to positioning each plank to match the wood's natural characteristics—is based not on a predetermined design but rather on the craftsman's intuition and skill. Each vessel is therefore a unique representation of the boat-maker's art. In 2010, the craft was designated a Gifu City Important Intangible Folk-Cultural Asset.