

Yamanaka Onsen

Yamanaka Onsen is a 1,300-year-old hot spring village located in the mountains of the Kaga area. The town's onsen baths and mountain scenery have fostered a rich culture of song, dance, geisha performing arts, and handcrafted lacquerware.

The town is centered around Kiku no Yu, a public, gender-segregated bathhouse in the main square. An *ashiyu* (footbath) and drinking spring outside the public bathhouse are both free of charge. The area's numerous ryokan inns offer Japanese-style lodging and local cuisine.

In the 1800s, captains and crew of *kitamaebune*, wooden ships that traded along the Sea of Japan coast, often visited the town during the winter season. Influence from the shanties they sang led to the creation of a song called *Yamanaka-bushi*. *Yamanaka-bushi* is performed by geisha on Saturdays, Sundays, and national holidays at the Yamanaka-za theater, located at the main square. On weekdays, the theater hosts more intimate *Yamanaka-bushi* performances in which visitors can play traditional games with geisha.

The town has a distinctive style of lacquerware. Each step of the lacquerware-making process is performed by a different artisan, and Yamanaka is most famous for its expert lathework. Locally crafted pieces can be found in many of the historic shops that line Yuge-kaido, the town's main street. Some shops let visitors try their hand at turning bowls and other items on a lathe. One kilometer north of the town center is Urushi-za, a Yamanaka lacquerware store, gallery, and museum. There is an adjacent school where woodturning is performed on site.

The Ayatori Bridge, meaning "cat's cradle bridge," spans the Kakusenkei Gorge in a unique shape reminiscent of its namesake game. It was designed by avant-garde filmmaker Teshigahara Hiroshi (1927–2001). After dark, the bridge is lit up, dramatically highlighting the gorge below. A 1.3-kilometer-long walking path winds through the forest, parallel to the river, on the side of the bridge opposite the town.