

Snow Country Culture

【Life in the Snow Country】

The city of Tōkamachi lies in a region of mountains and rolling hills known as “the snow country.” Snow accumulation there averages 2 meters annually, but the area receives as much as 4 meters of accumulated snowfall during especially harsh winters, which can last up to half the year. With such heavy snowfalls, the changing seasons are central to the flow of life in Tōkamachi. During summer, the city’s residents are busy farming and preserving food for the winter. In autumn, once the harvests have ended, residents make regular visits to the local medicinal hot springs to rejuvenate themselves for the long winter ahead.

For much of Tōkamachi’s history, families have spent months of each year cooped inside their homes by heavy snowfall. In order to make use of this time when the men were clearing snow and farm work was halted, the women of Tōkamachi brought out their looms. Tōkamachi is known as the birthplace of Echigo *chijimi*, a cloth woven from thread that is spun from a type of ramie called *karamushi*. During February and March, when the weather is sunniest, this fabric is spread out on the snow for several days, where it is bleached white by the sun.

During the Edo period (1603-1867), markets were held in town on the tenth, twentieth, and thirtieth days of each month. It is from this tradition that the town received its name, *tōkamachi*, or “ten-day town.” These markets were pivotal for people living in the surrounding mountains, who came to sell their crops and the handmade goods and textiles they had produced during the winter.