

Life in the Mountains

A Look into the Past of the Minami Alps

The Minami Alps Ashiyasu Alpen Museum offers an in-depth look into the lifestyle and culture of the people who lived on the slopes of these steep, deeply forested mountains. Visitors can appreciate the challenges of rural life and how local residents learned from nature to make the most of the environment around them.

Traditional Roles

There once were clear divisions of labor. Women, children, and the elderly worked the foothills of the mountains (*satoyama*), growing vegetables, rice, and tending domesticated animals. They would make rope, using straw left over after the harvest, and create straw sandals (*waraji*), woven snow boots (*yukigutsu*), and pouches to hold tools and utensils. Sewing and packing charcoal were also important skills, enabling families to keep warm through the icy winters.

Men spent most of their time in the forests, cutting down trees and splitting the wood for firewood and roofing shingles, or making charcoal. They would trap and hunt Japanese serows (*kamoshika*) and other wild game with their Kai Ken dogs, a now-rare breed raised specifically to hunt in mountainous terrain.

Both men and women would also strap on *shoiko*—carriers with an interlocking wooden frame wrapped in straw rope and shoulder straps decorated with colorful rags—to carry goods and produce to market.

Forestry in the Minami Alps

The huge array of tools used to fell, split, shape, and cut wood on display in the Minami Alps Ashiyasu Alpen Museum shows how essential forestry was in the region. While by modern standards the older methods would be considered unsustainable, it is impressive that the foresters of yore were able to clear-cut such large areas entirely by hand. Timber could be brought in from over 50 kilometers away by floating the felled trees down wooden sluices that wound down through the mountains. The logs would then be carried away by human-powered *torokko* carts on rails.

Today these forestry tools are museum pieces, and only a few craftspeople still make the items that were once considered everyday necessities.