

Modern History of Okunikko (1868–1945)

The mountains of Okunikko opened to the general public in 1871 following the removal of religious restrictions. An international summer resort town gradually grew up on the shore of Lake Chuzenji. In the beginning, there were only a few buildings other than temples and shrines, and the only way to get to Lake Chuzenji was the path formerly used by religious ascetics. However, as infrastructure expanded, the year-round population of Okunikko began to grow. Most of the early development was centered around the Chugushi area along the northeast shore of Lake Chuzenji, and services to support that community steadily increased. A telegraph office opened in 1890, followed by a post office in 1898. In 1902, Chugushi became the first place in Tochigi Prefecture to have a public telephone.

Transportation

The primary challenge in getting to Okunikko is the steep Kegon Valley. The old trails used by religious practitioners were narrow and difficult to traverse. They were first replaced with a wider switchback road, which was accessible only by foot or on horseback and had over 700 stairs cut into the path. After the road was leveled in 1889, travel by rickshaw became common. The road was again improved and opened to automotive traffic in 1925. In 1932, travelers were given an alternative to the winding road with the opening of a cable-car service from Akechidaira. The road was widened again in 1954, and a new second road was built in 1965. These are the Iroha Slope Roads that are still in use today.

Fishing: Industry and Recreation

Along with the general public, fish arrived in Okunikko after 1871. Kegon Falls is the main conduit for water flowing out of the highlands, and the 97-meter drop prevents fish from swimming farther upstream. Since its formation millions of years ago, there were no fish in Lake Chuzenji until human beings brought them. Char were the first to be added to the lake in 1873, quickly followed by carp, eels, and many other fish. In 1881, the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce created a fish hatchery on the south side of the lake in Fukasawa, near the base of Kegon Falls.

Thomas Glover (1838–1911), a Scottish businessman fond of fly fishing, first visited Okunikko in 1887. He financed the release of brook trout from Colorado into Lake Chuzenji in 1902 and 1904. Organizations supporting fishing as both a sport and an industry sprung up in this period, including the Lake Chuzenji Fishery Association in 1886, the Marunuma Trout Angling Club in 1914, and the Tokyo Angling and Country Club in 1925.

Captions (right to left)

- Chuzenji Road, circa 1900

The prototype of the current winding road that is now the Second Iroha Slope Road opened in 1889 and was used by rickshaw.

- Naka no Chaya

Midway up Chuzenji Road (now Second Iroha Slope Road) was the Naka no Chaya, or “Midway Teahouse.” The fare included mochi, *dango* (sweet rice dumplings), and tea to

fortify travelers before they ascended the upper half of the slope, which was the most difficult.

- Storm damage from the Ashio Typhoon of 1902

Record rainfall during the storm caused a landslide down Mt. Nantai, which crashed through the grounds of Chuzenji Temple, washing the Tachiki Kannon statue into Lake Chuzenji. Six-meter waves in the lake damaged houses along the shore.

- A Ford Model T at Senjogahara Marshland

Chuzenji Road was widened in 1925 to accommodate passenger vehicles. The Kanaya Hotel soon brought in several Ford Model T cars for use as passenger shuttles for guests. One is pictured here at Senjogahara Marshland.

- Yamamotoya Ryokan

By the early twentieth century, there were many grand hotels and ryokan inns along the lake in the Chugushi area, such as the Komeya and Tsutaya inns and the Lakeside Hotel. Like the Yamamotoya pictured here, these inns were often featured in picture postcards.

- Skiing at Yumoto Onsen

Soon after skiing was introduced to Japan in 1911, guests at Yumoto Onsen were taking baths in hot springs after a day of skiing. Today, in addition to cross-country skiing, there is backcountry skiing and snowshoeing on the eastern slopes of Mt. Shirane.