

Summer Resort for Foreign Diplomats

Okunikko's high altitude and cool climate have drawn visitors to Lake Chuzenji during the hottest days of summer for over 150 years. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was especially popular with members of the foreign diplomatic community who were based in Tokyo and Yokohama. Many embassies had vacation homes along the shores of the lake, and the many diplomats that traveled to Lake Chuzenji to escape the heat made it seem as if the country's sphere of international diplomacy had moved to Nikko for the summer.

For a number of years after Japan opened its ports under treaties such as the Harris Treaty (1858) between Japan and the United States, foreign residents could not travel freely and were restricted to certain zones. Beginning in 1875, non-Japanese could apply to the Japanese government for special permission to travel outside of those zones. It was not until the extraterritoriality laws were abolished in 1899 that they were able to travel freely.

The document at the top right is an application for permission to travel, addressed to Mutsu Munemitsu (1844–1897), Minister for Foreign Affairs. To the left is a letter granting permission for travel outside the restricted zone for foreign residents, addressed to Miss F. J. Eldridge, dated 1894.

The photograph on the right is of a yacht race on Lake Chuzenji, a weekly event sponsored by the Nantaisan Yacht Club. The photograph on the left is of lakeside vacation homes in the Ojiri area.

Italian Embassy Villa

Pictured at the top left of the panel is the Italian Embassy Villa, built in 1928 by the Czech-born US architect Antonin Raymond (1888–1976), who had a long and successful career in Japan. Japanese cedar paneling covers both the exterior and interior surfaces, and the structure is noted for the way it blends into the surroundings. The home was used by the Italian embassy until 1997 and was acquired the following year by Tochigi Prefecture. It is now open to the public as the Italian Embassy Villa Memorial Park.

Below the photograph is a map showing the location of the villa on the southeastern shore of Lake Chuzenji. To the right, the sketch in red shows many of the architectural details of the structure. At bottom left are the floor plans of the first and second floors.