

Wada House

The Wada House is the largest and most prominent of the more than 100 gassho-style buildings in Shirakawa-go. Built in the late Edo period (1603–1867), the house reflects the wealth and authority of the Wada family, which for centuries was the richest and most influential in the area. Throughout the Edo period, the family held the title of village headman and oversaw the government checkpoint at the northern end of Shirakawa-go, which regulated the flow of people and goods into and out of the area. The Wada accumulated a sizable fortune, first in the production and trading of saltpeter (potassium nitrate, an essential ingredient in gunpowder) and, from the latter half of the 1800s, in sericulture. In 1889, the head of the Wada family was appointed the first mayor of the modern village of Shirakawa.

Parts of the three-story Wada House are still used as a residence, but most of the rooms and the spacious attic are open to the public. Though the building has been renovated to some extent, it gives visitors a sense of how an affluent family lived when Shirakawa-go was at the height of its prosperity. Facing the front of the house, one notices two entrances: The smaller one on the right was for residents, while the large doors on the left, which lead up to two tatami-mat rooms, were only opened for important guests such as government officials. The Wada House is the only building in Shirakawa-go with such an entrance, which speaks to the family's high standing.

The first floor of the residence centers on a traditional irori fireplace and displays items used in daily life such as tableware and kitchen utensils. There is also a large, ornate Buddhist family altar. In the multi-level attic, displays of tools and equipment illustrate how the roof of the house is thatched, while guests can also get a close look at the inside of the roof structure, which is secured using only straw rope and bindings (neso) made of witch hazel saplings. In addition to the house, which is designated an Important Cultural Property, the Wada estate includes an adjacent garden and pond, a notably large outhouse (lavatory), and a fire-resistant storehouse (kura) in the back.