

Snow and Shirakawa-go

Shirakawa-go is located in the Shō river valley, at the foot of the 2,702-meter Mt. Haku (Hakusan) some 50 kilometers inland from the Sea of Japan. Every winter, wet air from the sea collides repeatedly with the mountain, bringing plentiful snowfall to the valley from late November to March. The residents of Shirakawa-go have long since adapted their lifestyles to the snowy weather. Most famously, the thatched roofs of the area's traditional gassho-style houses were originally built with a steep slant in order to avoid damage caused by snow piling up on the roof and meltwater dripping in through it. Their shape, however, does not prevent snow from sticking entirely, and most residents have to get up on the roof to remove pile-ups at least once every winter. Another measure taken locally to protect homes from the weight of the snow is to set up barriers along their sides, underneath the edge of the roof. Called yukigakoi, these fences prevent snow that has fallen off the roof and piled up on the ground from crushing the walls of the house. Although Shirakawa-go would in the past occasionally get cut off from the outside world due to snow blocking the mountain roads, the area is now readily accessible year-round. In January and February, many visitors come to admire the winter landscape in the village of Ogimachi, where a light-up display takes place on Sunday evenings.