

The Town of Kamikatsu

Kamikatsu is a small town in Tokushima Prefecture on the island of Shikoku. It is located in the mountains along the Katsuura River, about 40 kilometers southwest of the city of Tokushima, and one and a half hours by car from Tokushima Awaodori Airport. The town has only a single traffic light and not even one convenience store, yet has gained global recognition for its approaches to modern challenges like waste and rural depopulation despite its small size and remote location.

The Facts

Kamikatsu has the smallest population of any town on Shikoku. It has an area of 109.68 square kilometers, 88.3 percent of which are forests. About 80 percent of the forests are cultivated and are planted mainly with Japanese cedar. The population peaked at around 6,000 in the 1950s when the forest industry was thriving, but there has since been extensive migration to urban areas. The population is now around 1,500, and 53 percent of residents are over the age of 65 (as of 2020). With such a small population, there are no police or fire stations. Firefighters are all volunteers and have other full-time jobs. The same is true for road cleaners and taxi drivers. The volunteerism that is a fundamental part of the local culture shows the spirit of community and service common in Kamikatsu.

Rising to the Challenge of Aging and Depopulation

Community members are responding to the challenges of a rapidly aging and shrinking population with fresh ideas that build on the town's heritage. One example that keeps seniors engaged is the introduction of hands-on activities at the rice terraces, which have been preserved relatively unchanged since the 1680s. In addition, elderly residents teach rice planting, thatched roof making, and other local traditions at the Kamikatsu Kayabuki School, which opened in 2019. They pass on their knowledge and skills as well as promote interest in rural living.

Another example is employment opportunities for the elderly. Women are putting their artistic and sewing skills to use at the Kuru Kuru Kobo craft center, transforming used kimono and *koinobori* carp streamer fabric into bags, jackets, and other keepsake items. They opened an online store in 2013 and accept orders for tailor-made items from around the world. Many seniors also stay active by working for a local business called Irodori that supplies restaurants throughout the country with seasonal garnish (*tsumamono*) leaves and flowers, taking orders online.

The decline in population has also meant growing budgetary constraints. In 2003, Kamikatsu made a pledge to achieve zero waste, in part because the town could not afford a large waste incineration facility. The local government, NPOs, residents, and others have worked together to achieve a 100 percent recycling rate. So far, they have hit 80 percent, surpassing the national rate of around 20 percent. One way that residents cooperate is by composting organic waste at home and bringing containers to local shops to reduce packaging waste.

Natural Beauty

Kamikatsu's mountain surroundings, dense forests, clear waters, misty valley, and winding roads offer a stark contrast to modern urban life. Local residents are also working to preserve the native woodland and its rare trees, like endangered coast redwoods and the Kubo no Osugi, a 60-meter high Japanese cedar tree that is about 1,500 years old. Kamikatsu's many waterways offer a variety of water activities like kayaking and stand up paddle boarding. The town is also an outstanding location for stargazing, since it lies in a basin surrounded by mountains that block artificial light from surrounding areas.