

## Life in the Mountains

Montane living brings its own challenges, particularly since snow covers the Myoko-Togakushi region for five months each year. Residents have adapted to the demands of weather and terrain while maintaining a profound respect for the landscape that sustains them. From traditional foods and handicrafts to religious practices, life here is shaped by the surrounding mountains.

## Mountain Worship

Shugendo is a form of Japanese mountain asceticism that developed during the tenth century as a blend of Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism, and the worship of mountains as the dwelling places of deities. Shugendo has always involved a deep reverence for remote peaks, and its traditions are strongly preserved in the Myoko-Togakushi area.

The Fire Festival, held in the city of Myoko each July at Sekiyama-jinja Shrine, is over 1,200 years old. During the festival, young men dressed as itinerant Shugendo monks (*yamabushi*) demonstrate traditional weapons in a manner dating back more than 400 years.

In Togakushi (part of the city of Nagano), there is a historical preservation district that includes two thatch-roofed *shukubo* complexes that date to the mid-Edo period (1603–1867). *Shukubo* are guest lodgings in a temple or shrine; traditionally, they catered to the pilgrims, traveling monks, and laypeople who journeyed great distances to worship. Many *shukubo* are still operating, and they are open to visitors. Guests gain a closer look at the daily activities of a temple or shrine, and even eat meals prepared by the priests or monks who live there.

The sacred character of the mountains is sometimes tied to tangible aspects of the terrain itself. For example, the northeastern face of Mt. Myoko exhibits a curious phenomenon: as the snow melts each spring, some of it lingers in crevices near the summit to form a stark-white likeness of the character for “mountain.” This three-pronged shape (山) was also thought to resemble a Buddhist triad—Amida Buddha flanked by two bodhisattva attendants. Visible symbols such as this have strengthened reverence for the mountain. In the early seventeenth century, that reverence led a head priest of nearby Hozoin Temple to create a special garden outside his residence. The garden reproduced the Mt. Myoko landscape in miniature, recreating the mountains’ ridges and waterfalls below a group of stones meant to replicate the sacred summit. Mt. Myoko itself forms the garden’s backdrop, a landscaping device called “borrowed scenery” (*shakkei*). The garden’s purpose was more than simply decorative; by reproducing Mt. Myoko in his own backyard, the priest created a place to worship the

mountain without having to climb it. Hozoin Temple has since been lost, but the garden has been carefully reconstructed and is open to visitors.

### **Buckwheat**

While the region's heavy snowfalls ensure plenty of water for lowland rice cultivation, growing rice in the cooler temperatures of high altitudes can be difficult. Residents in the Togakushi area have long relied on buckwheat (*soba*) as a short-season, cold-hardy alternative.

Buckwheat grown in Togakushi is a native variety that has been grown locally for centuries. While buckwheat producers elsewhere are adopting larger-grained hybrid strains, beginning in 2007, Togakushi farmers elected to grow only a particular regional variety that has been sheltered from cross-pollination. Its seeds are comparatively small and it produces only one annual crop rather than two, but Togakushi residents claim the local *soba* has a unique bitter flavor. This nostalgic taste has become a valued part of the regional identity.

### ***Sasa-zushi***

This variation on sushi is made by topping leaves of Veitch's bamboo (*kumazasa*) with vinegared rice and ingredients gathered from the mountain forests: seasoned wild vegetables (*sansai*), shiitake mushrooms, or walnuts.

### ***Karami Chomiryo* (Spicy Seasoning)**

This Myoko specialty is made from locally grown chili peppers, *yuzu* citrus, salt, and *koji* (a fermentation starter). It takes over three years to make, and begins with spreading out salted chili peppers on the surface of the snow. This exposure removes their natural bitterness. Next, the peppers are mixed with the *yuzu* and *koji* and allowed to ferment. The sight of colorful chili peppers spread across the snow—called *yukisarashi*—is associated countrywide with the city of Myoko.

### **Bamboo Handicrafts**

Long ago, residents of Togakushi learned to make excellent use of a mountain resource close to hand: the bamboo species called *chishimazasa*. Pliable strips of *chishimazasa* are woven into elegant, durable containers of all shapes—from traditional winnowing baskets to modern flower vessels and even coffee strainers.

Bamboo craft in Togakushi has a history of roughly 400 years. Craftsmen cultivate the slender canes in the mountains until they are several meters long, then harvest them

by hand. Next, they split long, even strips from the canes and weave them into plates and baskets, incorporating patterns that highlight the bamboo's subtle green and yellow color variations.

Visitors can participate in bamboo-weaving workshops at stores in Togakushi.