

Kappa Bridge

Kappa Bridge is a wooden suspension bridge that spans the Azusa River at the heart of Kamikōchi. Crowded with visitors throughout the season, the bridge offers a perfect vantage point that frames Mt. Myōjin (2,931 m) and Mt. Oku-Hotaka (3,190 m) between forested valley walls. Beneath Kappa Bridge, river stones and fish are easily visible through the cold, clear current of the Azusa.

The first Kappa Bridge was a drawbridge, but it was rebuilt in 1910. Kappa Bridge appears in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's 1927 novella *Kappa*, which draws a detailed picture of Kamikōchi at that time. The novella's central character, a psychiatric patient, narrates his tale of entering the land of *kappa*—water imps known for their mischievous and sometimes sinister nature. The narrator concludes that their society is preferable to that of humans.

Today, *kappa* are understood to be fictional, but still fondly regarded in Japanese culture. The green-skinned, human-like creatures have webbed feet and hands, turtle-like shells on their backs, and a bowl-like depression on their heads that is full of water. Folk wisdom instructs that upon meeting a *kappa*, one should bow politely, because when the *kappa* bows in return, the water will spill from its head and render it powerless. In some regions, cucumbers are said to be their favorite food—the origin of the Japanese name for sushi rolls with cucumber filling, *kappa maki*.

There are several theories regarding why the bridge is named after this mythical creature. One suggests that *kappa* (or similar aquatic creatures) once lived in a deep pool nearby; another says that the bridge was actually built over such a pool. A third theory speculates that before the bridge was built, people fording the river with their clothes on their heads resembled *kappa*.