

Making Your Own *Kamakura*

The Yokote area is famous for domed snow structures called *kamakura*. Until the mid-twentieth century, *kamakura* were made by individual families, but today, most of them are made by specialists called “*kamakura* artisans” (*kamakura shokunin*). To become a *kamakura* artisan, you must first join the Kamakura Artisan Apprenticeship program at the Yokote Tourism Association, where you will be allowed to work with the current artisans during the Winter Festival. Once you gain enough experience, you will be recognized as an official *kamakura* artisan by the tourism association. However, whether you are an officially recognized specialist or not, making your own snow dome is a fun winter pastime.

Shaping the Dome

Construction of a *kamakura* begins with marking out the perimeter. Professional artisans start by tying two sticks together with a rope 1.8 meters in length. One end is stuck into the snow, and the other is used like a drafting compass to mark a circle with a diameter of 3.6 meters. Next, snow is gradually piled into the circle and packed tightly using the back of a shovel or one’s own feet. Once the snow pile has reached a height of 2.5 meters, more snow is piled on top and rounded to create the dome shape. With the addition of the dome, the snow structure should stand 3 meters high. The pile is left to harden for two to three days before work on the interior begins.

Carving Out the Interior

Once the snow has hardened, an oval 70 centimeters across and 130 centimeters high is drawn with a stick to denote the entrance. It is important to give the *kamakura* a large entrance to provide good airflow when using a brazier inside it. A shovel is then used to hollow out the dome until the walls are 70 centimeters thick. (The thickness of the walls can be tested by poking a stick out from the inside.) The back of a shovel is used to smooth out the interior and the exterior of the dome.

Shaping the Altar

Traditionally, a shelf measuring about 1 meter long and 20 to 30 centimeters high is dug out of the back interior wall to create the altar that faces the entrance. This shelf, which is used to hold offerings, reflects the Shinto origins of *kamakura*. Next, an arrow-shaped, 10-centimeter-deep alcove is dug 10 centimeters above the shelf. A rectangular slip of paper with the characters 水神様 (*oshizu-sama*), meaning “water god,” are

displayed on the wall inside the alcove. Candles, fruit, sake, and other offerings are placed on the shelf in front of the shrine. Woven mats and a small brazier may also be brought in so that mochi (sweet rice cakes) and *amazake* (a fermented rice drink) can be prepared inside the *kamakura*.