

## **Ojiya in Winter**

Niigata Prefecture's Echigo region, where Ojiya is located, is called "snow country" for its heavy snowfall and extreme winters. In winter, cold winds from Siberia pick up moisture as they sweep over the Sea of Japan. The moist air collides with the high mountains of Niigata, causing large amounts of precipitation, high above the average for similar latitudes. During this season, Ojiya and its surroundings become a winter playground, with an array of events, winter festivals, and outdoor activities encouraging enjoyment of the snowy landscape. The snow season typically lasts from late November to mid-March.

### *Ojiya Hot Air Balloon Festival*

Dozens of colorful hot air balloons soar above the snow-covered landscape during the Ojiya Hot Air Balloon Festival, held over two days in late February. The festival takes place at a competition site and other venues outside the city. Check in advance for details about venue locations.

At the competition site, teams compete in the annual Japan Sea Cross Country Cup to land their hot air balloon closest to a designated target. Over 40 hot air balloon teams from around Japan compete in a game called "hare and hound." The first balloon launched, known as the "hare," sets up a marked target, landing some distance away from the launch site. The other teams, the "hounds" launch their balloons and attempt to set down as close as possible to the target. The "hound" closest to the marker obtains the highest number of points. This process is repeated three times, and the team with the highest total score wins.

At other venues, festival-goers can try hot air balloon rides, and food stalls serve up hearty treats like ramen and sweet potato pudding. During the event, small, handmade paper balloons called *boko* are released into the air. One of the highlights of the festival is the evening "glow balloon" event, when hot air balloons are illuminated against a background of shimmering fireworks.

### *Yamaya Tsubono Igloo Festival*

At Yamaya Tsubono Honyarado Festival (Igloo Festival) in early February, around 5,000 small igloos called *honyarado* are lit up with candles, creating an enchanting

scene. Visitors can try making their own igloos and enjoy *hegi* soba and other local delicacies at one of the many food stalls. The event is held in the Yamaya area.

#### *Other winter activities*

Snow tubing, snowmobiling, and sledding are among the many activities available throughout the winter season in the region. Yamamotoyama, a 336-meter highland in the south part of Ojiya, is covered with a thick blanket of snow in winter, and is an ideal spot for snowshoe trekking.