

## **Rakuzan'en Garden**

The Rakuzan'en Garden is located on the former grounds of a villa once owned by the Osakaya Miwa family, who were wealthy merchants in the Edo period (1603–1867). The garden is laid out on a steep slope, and the main building commands a panoramic view of the Yoita area of Nagaoka and the mountains beyond. In mid-May, when azalea bushes are in bloom, a special light-up event is held at night with a tea service, concerts, and other performances.

### *The Osakaya Miwa Family*

The Miwa family originally belonged to the warrior class of Etchu Province (present-day Toyama Prefecture), but later moved to Nagaoka and found employment with the Osakaya merchant family. Eventually, they received permission to set up a branch shop in Yoita under the Osakaya name. During the Edo period, the Osakaya Miwa grew wealthy by operating merchant ships that transported rice, salt, and seafood to Kyoto and Osaka and brought textiles, medicines, books, and other goods to Nagaoka. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Osakaya Miwa were considered one of the wealthiest merchant families in the country.

### *Rakuzantei and the Garden Grounds*

The path up the slope winds along castle-like retaining walls, leading to the Rakuzantei house, the heart of the Rakuzan'en Garden. Rakuzantei was built in 1892 by Miwa Juntaro, the 11th head of the Osakaya Miwa family. Though the structure may appear simple, meticulous craftsmanship was employed to create an elegant and comfortable place for entertaining guests. For example, some of the pillars on the veranda were omitted to provide a better view of the town below, and decorative touches in the sitting rooms, bathroom, and hallways were designed to delight visitors. Substantial investment went into understated, subtle elements of the house and the front garden, including stones transported from across the country and rare woods used in the tokonoma alcoves.

Further up the slope is Sekisui'an, a replica of a tea house that is now preserved at the Northern Culture Museum in the city of Niigata. Beyond Sekisui'an is a small Kannon Hall that enshrines an eleven-headed sculpture of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, thought to have been carved in the fourteenth century. The multiple heads of this type of Kannon statue are depicted with a wide range of emotions, such as crying, scowling, gazing serenely, and laughing.

*Poet-Monk Ryokan*

The Osakaya Miwa family maintained a friendship with Ryokan (1758–1831), a Soto Zen Buddhist monk, poet, and calligrapher. Ryokan was born near Nagaoka and spent much of his life as a hermit in the region. He sometimes visited the villa and was particularly close with Ikyoni and Saichi, the daughter and the younger brother of the sixth head of the family, respectively. Saichi eventually became Ryokan's disciple.

Two memorial stones in the Rakuzan'en Garden bear words written by Ryokan. One reproduces a letter sent to Ikyoni while the monk was traveling, asking her to take care of her health during the cold winter. The other quotes Ryokan's writings after Saichi's death, in which the poet-monk contemplates the coming spring that he must spend without his friend.