

Muro'oka Farmhouse: A Tour of the Past

The Matsudai History Museum is housed in a historic building called the Muro'oka Farmhouse. The house is named after its original owners, an influential Tokamachi family of the late 1800s. The building's zelkova-wood frame is older than the rest of the house and dates to the nineteenth century, and the family reused it when building their farmhouse in 1935. Today, both the exterior and interior are preserved so visitors can glimpse life in a snow-country farming household.

The two-story building was moved to its present location in 2009. It has many of the features distinctive of snow-country architecture, including a steep roof supported by massive, 10-meter-tall zelkova beams, large loft spaces for storing cloth- and straw-weaving materials, and high ceilings to draw up smoke from heating and cooking fires.

The floorplan follows a multi-room layout called *chumon-zukuri* that was common in snow country. Just inside the entrance is an expansive earthen-floored vestibule for shedding damp winter outerwear, and beside it is an indoor livestock pen to keep the farm animals from freezing. The vestibule leads directly to a raised tatami-floored room called the *niwa*, the heart of the house in *chumon-zukuri*. The room's main feature is an *irori* hearth: a charcoal firepit set into the floor for warmth and cooking. Domestic life centered around the *irori*, and thus the house's most-frequented rooms, such as the kitchen, bath, and living room, are conveniently arrayed around the *niwa*.

Inside are thousands of traditional tools, items of furniture, housewares, and art donated by local residents. The rooms are filled with implements of daily life from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second floor has extensive exhibits on the history and significance of nearby Matsuo Shrine and a video with archival footage of its Nanatsu Mairi festival.

Volunteer guides are happy to give Japanese-speaking visitors an even more immersive experience, teaching them words in the local dialect, playing traditional games used to pass the time on long winter nights, and telling stories through a collection of black-and-white photos depicting life in snow country.