

## What is *Yukiguni*?

Visitors to Tokamachi often hear the term *yukiguni* in discussions of the local culture and lifestyles. The word translates to “snow country” and refers to regions with heavy snowfall, but it is used with complex and poetic nuances.

*Yukiguni* extends from Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido down through the Tohoku region of northern Honshu. Along the Sea of Japan coast, it stretches as far as Shimane Prefecture. Tokamachi, despite being on the same latitude as the balmy Mediterranean, is one of the snowiest regions of all. The city’s heavy snowfall is due to its position between the Sea of Japan and the Mikuni Mountain Range, part of a chain that runs down the center of Honshu. In winter, cold winds blow down from Siberia and across the Sea of Japan, where they collide with warm, moist air carried north on the Tsushima Current. The air fills with cooling water vapor as it continues toward Japan, forming cumulonimbus clouds when it eventually hits the barrier of Niigata’s inland mountains. Relentlessly pushed by ascending air currents, the clouds drop the heavy moisture they contain in the form of snow.

In addition to its literal meaning, the term *yukiguni* also has many poetic connotations. It has appeared in art from ancient *tanka* poems to modern J-Pop, though likely no instance is as famous as Kawabata Yasunari’s (1899–1972) classic novel *Snow Country*, which tells the story of a doomed love affair between a Tokyo businessman and a geisha at an unnamed hot spring resort. The novel is cited as one of the reasons Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize. The novel opens:

*The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky.*

Through use in literature and popular culture, the term *yukiguni* has come to shape the image of northern Japan in the public consciousness. In a single phrase, it evokes expanses of unbroken snow, lonely landscapes of denuded trees, and craggy mountains girdled in frozen white. It often implies a reverence for the unique and forbidding natural world created by heavy snows and respect for the perseverance and fortitude of people who choose to carve out a life in that environment.

In Tokamachi, this romantic spirit of “snow country” still exists, as it has for thousands of years.