

Hoshitoge Rice Terraces

The Hoshitoge Rice Terraces are a favorite spot for photographers! In early summer, the 200-odd paddies are flooded, creating pools of water that capture reflections of the sky. In autumn, the lush green rice stalks bend and sway under the weight of golden-yellow grains. The scenery is striking even in winter, as the first snows line the paddies in white.

It's a landscape that Tokamachi residents have been enjoying for hundreds of years. In this mountainous region, paddies were cut into the slopes to increase the amount of flat land for farming. Snowmelt, springs, and other runoff supply the irrigation water, which flows into reservoirs dug at the tops of the slopes. The beech groves along the top of the ridge also help with the water supply. They hold snowmelt and rainwater in their thick root systems and loamy layers of fallen leaves, keeping the water from rushing downhill and instead supplying it to the reservoirs.

The rice terraces are an example of how people have adapted to the demanding conditions of snow country. Residents are working hard to preserve them so we can all enjoy this incredible scenery for years to come!

Bijinbayashi, a Grove of Beauties

See how straight these beech trees are, clustered together like bristles on a brush? It's a beautiful scene—but if you know anything about beeches, it may strike you as odd.

Beeches are usually solitary giants, with large canopies that block even their own seeds from sprouting nearby. Their trunks and branches spread and twist, competing to reach as much sunlight as they can. So how did so many beeches end up here, all growing upward in parallel, straight and slim?

This area was once a natural beech forest, with trees of many sizes and ages. In the 1910s, the landowner was moving to Tokyo and needed money. He decided to cut down all the mature trees and sell them. The following spring, the small saplings that remained had no competition for sunlight and grew up quickly, straight towards the sky. People in the area were so charmed by the grove that they decided to preserve it as a scenic attraction—naming it Bijinbayashi, or “the wood of beautiful women.”

Bijinbayashi is just a short walk from the Echigo-Matsunoyama Museum of Natural Science “Kyororo,” where visitors can find out more about Tokamachi's fascinating ecology.

Archaeological Excavations

Ever wondered what secrets might lie in the ground beneath your feet? Archaeological digs have told us that people have lived in the Shinano River Basin—an area that includes modern-day Tokamachi—for more than 10,000 years. We know this because excavations have unearthed fragments of pottery and other evidence of long-ago

settlements.

The pottery pieces are particularly important not only for dating but because they give us clues about the lives of these early inhabitants. Organic remains like bone have long since dissolved in Japan's acidic soil, but the carbonized remnants of ancient meals cling to earthenware cooking vessels, telling us about the diets of early settlers. The shape of the vessels tells us something, too. Earlier pieces have simple, functional shapes, while later examples like Niigata's unique "flame-style" pottery are highly ornate, suggesting a religious or ceremonial use.

The Tokamachi City Museum has over 1,000 artifacts from local excavations in its collection, including many National Treasures, and extensive bilingual displays cover everything we know about the earliest inhabitants of snow country.

Weaving Culture

Tokamachi is famous for its heavy snowfalls. Before the advent of modern conveniences like snowplows and electric heating, this meant much of the winter was spent indoors by the fire. This time wasn't spent idly, though. For at least 5,000 years, residents have been weaving cloth from ramie, a plant that grows abundantly in the nearby countryside. During winter, when farms lay fallow, people spun thread and wove it into cloth.

Over the years, Tokamachi weavers have produced many different types of cloth and even added silk dyeing to their repertoires. But the region is perhaps best known for *chijimi*, a lightweight silk crepe fabric that was in demand for summertime samurai robes in the eighteenth century. It is still made in Tokamachi, dyed and handwoven following traditional methods, but these days local weavers use it for more than just kimonos. There are silk bags, neckties, table runners, and more!

Kimono Making

Tokamachi has a long-established and diverse weaving culture that includes both silks and plant-fiber fabrics. Unsurprisingly, that culture has made it a center for kimono production. Maybe you're familiar with this iconic Japanese garment, but do you know how it's made?

With plant-fiber fabrics, the threads are generally dyed before weaving, and patterns are created by combining different colors in the weave. Silk fabrics, on the other hand, are usually dyed after weaving, so the designs can be much more complex. In Tokamachi, the main method used is *yuzen*, a resist-dyeing technique.

A kimono is usually made from a single roll of cloth around 13 to 16 meters long, with nothing wasted. The craftsperson determines which areas of the fabric will be the sleeves and body panels, then dyes the roll with an eye to the finished product. It requires great skill to align the pieces so the pattern appears unbroken across the seams.

From design conception to finished product, an ornate kimono can take a year or more to make. Even simpler ones generally take several months, as so much of the process is still done by hand in Tokamachi. But all that time and know-how is necessary to produce elegant garments like these.