

## Welcome to the Gasshozukuri Minkaen Open-Air Museum

The villages of Shirakawa-gō are located in a remote, mountainous region that was mostly isolated for centuries. This seclusion, plus the area's snowy climate and rugged terrain, led the inhabitants to adopt a unique way of life—one symbolized by houses with characteristically steep, thatched roofs in a design known as “*gasshō*-style” (*gasshō-zukuri*).

At the Gasshozukuri Minkaen Open-Air Museum, visitors can tour real, historical houses typical of Shirakawa-gō. While most houses in other parts of Shirakawa-gō are private residences—closed to the public and viewable only from the outside—the museum's homes and other traditional structures are open to exploration from within. Guests can wander the buildings' interiors, learning how *gasshō*-style structures were built and used. From multi-level attics to carefully shaped thatched eaves, the houses reveal features unique to this iconic architectural style. Inside, displays of traditional tools, furniture, and other artifacts offer a vivid picture of the inhabitants' way of life. Visitors can see how the villagers of Shirakawa-gō produced saltpeter and silk, and how they survived the snowy winter months by making skillful use of the surrounding landscape.

The museum was established to preserve *gasshō*-style homes shortly after a hydroelectric dam was built on the Shō River, causing it to flood and wash away many historic structures. The museum's creation was also a response to the rapid depopulation of villages such as Kazura (north of modern Shirakawa) in the 1960s, which left many traditional homes empty. As the years went on, the museum continued to acquire additional *gasshō*-style homes, as well as storehouses, barns, a shrine, a temple, and a watermill.

Nine structures at the museum are currently listed as Important Cultural Properties of Gifu Prefecture. They include the Former Yamashita Harurō House, which was built in the mid-1750s and is the museum's oldest example of the *gasshō* style; the Former Higashi Shina House, a prototypical *gasshō*-style house thought to have been built in the late 1800s; the Former Nakano Yoshimori House, built in 1909 and noted for its large central support beam; and the Former Nakano Chōjirō House, another late-1800s home distinguished by the reddish-purple walls in its tatami-mat rooms, which are painted with a traditional pigment called *bengara*.

The museum's structures have been closely grouped for convenient access, but their arrangement was designed to feel like a traditional village. The grounds are planted with many of the shrubs and trees used historically in Shirakawa-gō, such as Japanese witch hazel and horse chestnut. Other wild plants include bamboo lily and Japanese hyacinth.

The museum also has a soba restaurant and a rest area that sells snacks—such as mochi (glutinous rice cakes) made with mugwort, Japanese horse chestnut, or millet—as well as souvenirs crafted by town residents. There are also opportunities to join hands-on workshops on making soba noodles or weaving the straw sandals (*ashinaka*) that were traditionally worn in Shirakawa-gō.