

***Gasshō-zukuri*: An Overview**

Shirakawa-gō is best known for large houses with steep, thatched roofs built in a style called *gasshō-zukuri*. *Zukuri* means “construction” or “building,” while *gasshō* refers to the triangular shape made by hands pressed together in prayer.

The villagers of Shirakawa-gō constructed homes in this style because steep roofs shed snow more easily. The style also allowed for large attics that could be used for the village’s primary industry, silkworm cultivation. These attics could be divided into multiple levels to maximize space for cultivation. Large windows in the gable ends let in light and air, creating an ideal environment for the silkworms.

Although the ground floor was built from wood by professional carpenters, the roof was built and thatched by the villagers themselves. The thatching, made with thousands of bundles of grass or reeds gathered from the mountains, was replaced every few decades in a massive, one-day communal effort involving up to 200 villagers. This tradition continues today, albeit in modified form, with the help of local companies.

Today, *gasshō*-style houses dating back as far as the 1700s can be seen in both Shirakawa-gō and Gokayama in nearby Toyama Prefecture. Visitors to Shirakawa-gō’s Gasshozukuri Minkaen Open-Air Museum can enter several well-preserved houses to experience them firsthand.