

Fire Prevention: Then and Now

Although *gasshō*-style houses were ideal for the residents of Shirakawa-gō in many respects, their wooden construction and grass-thatched roofs were (and are) very susceptible to fire. Open-air hearths within the homes were traditionally used for cooking and heating, and stray embers could easily spark flames in the attic or other parts of the house.

Historically, the focus was as much on containing fires as on preventing them. For example, houses were built with adequate space between them so that fires did not jump from one house to the next. Considerable space was also maintained between the houses and their associated storehouses.

Today, Shirakawa-gō and the Gasshozukuri Minkaen Open-Air Museum have adopted strict fire-prevention measures. Smoking is prohibited except in designated areas, and smoke detectors are installed in all structures. In addition, there are patrols up to three times a day to check for fire hazards, and fire drills are conducted on a regular basis.

One of the more remarkable modern-day measures is a system of water cannons that can spray high-powered jets of water far into the air. These jets can be aimed at roofs or adjusted to form a wall of water between structures. The museum is unable to demonstrate the cannons' operation for visitors; however, during biannual drills, dozens of the water cannons are fired together in a striking scene that is pictured in posters around town.