

Totsukawa: An Introduction

(Web)

Welcome to Totsukawa, a secluded enclave nestled in a remote mountainous area of Nara Prefecture. With an area of about 672 square kilometers, Totsukawa is only slightly smaller than Singapore and a little larger than the 23 wards of central Tokyo. Mountains make up some 96 percent of the terrain, a greater proportion than in Nepal or Switzerland. Fifty-five hamlets are scattered across the mountaintops and deep valleys, with populations ranging from single families to several hundred residents. There are no train lines here. Instead, the communities are connected by an intricate network of roads that seem to wind and bend every few meters, except when they are passing through one of the 43 tunnels that have been built in recent years to improve access. The bus that traverses Totsukawa from north to south three times a day, following a route that links most of the population, takes about two and a half hours, one way. In one mountainous area, a river that cuts through a rugged gorge was the only means of transport for years.

Totsukawa is categorized as a *mura*, or “village” in Japanese, though its dimensions are more like those of a region or district. While its historical roots date back to the earliest days of Japan, Totsukawa’s isolated location and limited transportation options kept it off the beaten track. It remains a virtual secret shared by those who come to bask in its rustic rural culture, follow in the footsteps of legendary samurai, soak in its hot springs, raft its rivers, pay homage at its mountaintop shrine, or walk on the revered paths of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route.