

## **Yamakoshi**

Welcome to Yamakoshi!

Yamakoshi is made up of 14 settlements tucked among lush, forested mountains and the narrow valleys between them. No one knows exactly when people began inhabiting this area. However, the name “Koshi” is mentioned in historical documents from as early as the ninth century. In 1618, the region was incorporated into the newly formed Nagaoka domain, and the many small villages eventually came to be referred to collectively as the “Yamakoshi villages.” In the late nineteenth century, when the new Meiji government rearranged borders all across Japan, the area officially became one united village.

The name of each settlement in Yamakoshi references its founding family, its origins, or certain distinct characteristics. These include names with meanings such as “many oak trees,” “when the irises bloom,” and “oil-

making men.” The settlements were rather isolated, allowing residents to preserve distinct traditional customs and rituals that have been passed down from generation to generation.

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, most residents were primarily engaged in agriculture. They grew rice in terraced fields on the steep mountain slopes and raised carp in terraced ponds. Even today, farmers and koi breeders put great effort into maintaining and conserving these environments. The scenery is especially impressive in early summer when colorful sunsets reflect off the water, and in the early morning when the mountain landscape is shrouded in mist.

Many traditional homes in Yamakoshi had an indoor stable where families kept livestock. Because the slopes in Yamakoshi are steep, cows were better suited to farmwork and transportation than horses. When the animals were not being used to plant or harvest crops, they sometimes served as a form of entertainment. Bulls were pitted against each other in bouts of strength

in contests called *tsunotsuki*, or “horn thrusting.” Unlike other forms of bullfighting, *tsunotsuki* always ends in a draw once both animals have shown off their strength, since serious injury could render the bulls unable to work, and clear winners and losers could create negative feelings between villagers. Today, Yamakoshi is one of only nine places in Japan that still preserves a bullfighting culture.

Another still-thriving traditional industry is the breeding of decorative carp called *nishikigoi*, colorful fish often referred to as “living jewels.” In the past, plain black carp were cultivated as a food source. Fish were placed in paddies to spawn or mature along with the rice, and large fish were kept in dedicated terraced ponds. Before the heavy snowfalls of winter began, they would be transferred to household ponds, where they were a ready source of protein throughout the season. The shift to breeding the fish for decorative purposes came in the early nineteenth century when a red-patterned specimen is said to have been discovered among the plain black carp. Since then, selective breeding to bring out more color has resulted in approximately 100 different *nishikigoi* pattern variations. There are 150

commercial and hobby breeders operating in Nagaoka, and approximately 90 of those are located in Yamakoshi.

While exploring the scenic mountain villages, make sure to note the many koi ponds, cattle sheds, and rice and pond terraces that dot the landscape. These represent centuries-old traditions as well as a modern commitment to ensuring Yamakoshi remains a beautiful and vibrant place to live.