

## ***Machiya* Houses**

Traditional *machiya* town houses can be seen here and there along the streets of central Murakami, where merchants and artisans have lived and worked since the Edo period (1603–1867). Many of the houses remain in use as shops and private residences, and some are open to visitors throughout the year.

### *Prolonged properties*

The typical *machiya* is a long two-story building with a narrow front that faces the street. This configuration came about because property taxes in the Edo period were based on the width of street frontage. Immediately beyond the front door is a shop area divided into an earthen-floored entrance and a space with a raised floor where the shopkeeper would sit. A narrow earthen-floored passage leads from the shop through the house, past the living quarters, and to a yard in the back.

In the style of *machiya* common in Murakami, the first room beyond

the shop is the living room, where the family would gather for meals around the *irori* hearth. This room would also contain the family's Shinto and Buddhist altars, as well as a staircase up to the attic in some homes. Toward the back are the sleeping rooms, bathroom, and storerooms.

*Machiya* were usually built right next to each other and thus do not have windows on the sides. Instead, they often have high ceilings with skylights to let in natural light, which was a strategy to reduce the need for illumination that could increase the risk of fire.

#### *Visiting machiya*

Most *machiya* in Murakami line the central Machiya Street, where an association of local shop owners and residents has been working to preserve traditional houses and restore them to their original appearance since 2004.

More than 50 of the buildings are opened to the public in spring, when dolls associated with the annual Hinamatsuri (Doll Festival) are on display, and in autumn, when visitors can view decorative folding screens (*byōbu*).

Houses including a salmon shop, a confectionery, and a sake store can

be visited year-round. Also nearby is Kurobei Dori, a narrow street lined with traditional-style black fences that goes past several temples.