

Ibara Station and the Ibara Denim Store

A Denim Destination: Ibara Station

Ibara Station brings travelers into immediate contact with Ibara's cultural icons of archery and denim.

The station building opened in November 1999, and its design pays homage to Nasu no Yoichi's famous twelfth-century archery feat of shooting a fan that was hoisted from a boat. When viewed from the stone plaza in front of the station, the building's sweeping curve of steel resembles the asymmetric curve of a Japanese bow, and a towering glass cone stands just off-center like an arrow poised against the string. On the opposite end of the plaza there is a seemingly unrelated statue: a tall pedestal topped by a fan-shaped stone with a large round hole. This evokes the fan of legend shot by Yoichi, and when standing on the far side of the statue and looking back toward the station, the opening in the fan frames the tip of the glass tower, emphasizing the arrow-like shape as it seems to

fly into the distance.

Inside the station there is a cafe, a tourist services desk with souvenirs and bicycle rentals, and perhaps most striking, the Ibara Denim Store.

Denim Before It Was Denim

The Ibara area became a thriving center for cotton cultivation, weaving, and indigo dyeing during the Edo period (1603–1867). In the rapid industrialization that took place in the Meiji period (1868–1912), handlooms were increasingly replaced by large-scale mechanized looms. Many different types of cloth were made by the factories in Ibara, but a thickly woven textile called Bitchū-kokura was particularly well known for its use in school uniforms and work clothes.

One style of Bitchū-kokura, called *urajiro*, had white backing and a dyed surface. It was often dyed with indigo and was made using the same 3×1

twill weave as denim cloth from the West. There are records of at least one textile company in Ibara selling a product labeled “blue denim” by 1930, but when American denim was reintroduced to Japan after World War II, many Ibara weavers were already skilled in the basic techniques to produce this fabric. By around 1970, about 75 percent of Japan’s domestic denim jeans were made in Ibara.

Ibara Denim Today

In Ibara today, there are roughly 20 companies involved in producing denim fabric, and many more local workshops, handmade goods stores, and tailors turning that fabric into jeans, bags, shirts, and more. There are decorations and signs around town that attest to denim’s importance in the local economy, but the Ibara Denim Store is the first stop for many visitors to the city. It offers services beyond off-the-rack sales such as personalization, made-to-order denim suits, and size alterations.

In addition to the prominent space the Ibara Denim Store occupies within

the station building, there is also a small Denim Museum on the second floor detailing the history of denim in Ibara, and a workshop on the first floor called the “Garage” where visitors can try out part of the process of making products out of denim.