

History Under the Stars: Ibara's Bisei Area

The mountainous Bisei district is about twenty minutes by car from central Ibara. In addition to recreating part of Ibara's samurai-era history, it also preserves a local theater tradition and views of the night sky.

Medieval Yumegahara (Chūsei Yumegahara)

Chūsei Yumegahara is a history and culture park built to recreate a medieval village. The buildings and layout were based as closely as possible on archaeological evidence and painted scrolls depicting this time period. The village was constructed with period-appropriate materials and techniques. For example, a close look at exposed wooden beams and pillars reveals a herringbone pattern left by shaping them with a hand-held adze blade. This authenticity has attracted film production companies who use the village as a location for period dramas, as well as hobby photographers and cosplayers.

Chūsei Yumegahara's village square has a market with a variety of recreated shops, including one shop with actual items for sale and a swordsmith workshop where forging demonstrations are given once a week, April through November. Throughout the park, the different floor plans of the farmhouses show how people arranged their living and working spaces. For example, a house modeled on that of a higher-ranked warrior farmer is a large home with an attached stable for horses and a place to store weapons to help defend the village in times of conflict.

A mountain castle watchtower has been recreated atop the hill. Defenders climbed up the steep ladder-like stairs to watch for approaching bandits or rival armies, while below, a fortified building with storage for food, water, and arms served as a base for warriors to prepare for attacks.

Bitchū Kagura Dance

The Bisei Kibikōgen Kagura Folk Art Preservation Hall stands outside Chūsei Yumegahara's main entrance and stages live performances of

Bitchū Kagura. This is a local style of kagura: sacred rituals, dances, and plays that may be used for entertaining deities or offering prayers. Kagura can range from austere to extravagant, with many styles using vibrant costumes and masks to portray myths of deities and monsters. The Bitchū style belongs to the latter category, with many of its dances depicting heroic battles against larger-than-life foes. The colorful snake statues in front of the hall are based on the costumes for one such monster: Yamata no Orochi, a legendary eight-headed serpent that is portrayed on stage by multiple actors. Nonetheless, Bitchū Kagura is considered a somewhat restrained style, for those who uphold Bitchū Kagura choose to retain local traditions instead of pushing for more dramatic flair.

The hall contains a museum of costumes, masks, and props used in the local Bitchū Kagura tradition, as well as a theater space. The stage, considered a sacred space, is a small dais with tatami mats festooned with a twisted-straw *shimenawa* and an ornate paper decoration hanging overhead with auspicious cut-out shapes. Floor seating starts at the edge of the stage, placing audience members up close to the masked dance and sword-

swinging action.

Messages to the Stars

The name Bisei means “beautiful stars.” Aside from the clean mountain air, dark sky initiatives to install special streetlights have ensured low light pollution. It makes for such excellent stargazing conditions that there is both a public observatory and a JAXA (Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency) space debris monitoring station. In 2021, Bisei was named Asia’s first Dark Sky Community. However, this focus on stars is nothing new.

A local legend says that farmers saw a shooting star above Bisei split into three parts and fall to earth. People tracked where the pieces landed and built simple shrines, called *hokora*, dedicated to the fallen stars at those sites. In 1324, one of these three was moved and rebuilt into a full-size shrine: Hoshio Jinja.

This shrine, often silent by day, has used its stellar connections in a popular variation on the annual star-related Tanabata Festival. For Tanabata, people across the country write wishes on strips of colorful paper, called *tanzaku*, then hang them on bamboo branches. In 1989, the head priest of Hoshio Jinja held a public event to convey those wishes to the heavens through prayer and the ritual burning of local *tanzaku* in a sacred fire. The August 7 ritual now draws both *tanzaku* and visitors from around the country in the hope that Hoshio Jinja's starry connections will help make their dreams come true.