

Yakage's Historical District and Daimyo Hospitality

Located along a major road and a river, the town of Yakage has long been a stopping place for travelers. The heart of the town lies along a straight, 800-meter stretch of the Old San'yō Road connecting western Honshu with the old capital cities in western Japan, and later with other routes that connected to the new capital of the shogun in Edo. This area was lined with 200 narrow *machiya* townhouses, thriving businesses, and lodgings for important travelers such as daimyo lords and their attendants.

Yakage as a Post Town

Yakage became a post town (*shukuba*) in the Edo period (1603–1867). It served the daimyo traveling to Edo for the shogunate's *sankin kōtai* system of alternate attendance, which required regional lords to stay in the capital every other year. These trips were massive undertakings that took weeks of travel with hundreds of retainers, and they required careful planning in order to make stops at post towns with adequate facilities to lodge both the

daimyo and his entourage.

A post town offered a *honjin*, a house or business designated as an inn for a daimyo and some of his closest retainers, and *wakihonjin*, auxiliary inns to host lords of lower status and less-elevated members of a daimyo's entourage. Lesser inns and residences would host the remaining retainers, of whom there could be hundreds.

Yakage's historic district is unique for having both a *honjin* and a *wakihonjin* with well-preserved original structures. In 1969, both sites became nationally designated Important Cultural Properties.

The Yakage *Honjin* and *Wakihonjin*

The Yakage *honjin* was on the premises of a sake brewery owned by the Ishii family. The extensive grounds are still owned by the family and are open to the public. Some of the displays include expensive gifts to the hosts

given by traveling daimyo and records of the *honjin*'s operations. These records are as historically valuable as the buildings because they provide concrete details of the names of important officials and the dates of their stays, as well as menus served, retinue sizes, and amounts of money spent.

The architecture of the *honjin* includes special security features such as spike-topped walls and cleverly located steps to trip up assassins creeping in the dark. There are remnants of luxury as well, such as beautifully carved *ranma* transoms with patterns of squirrels and grapes, and *fusuma* sliding doors with gold detailing.

Located about 350 meters east from the *honjin* is Yakage's remaining *wakihonjin*. This estate was owned by the Takakusa family of wealthy merchants, and the extent of the facilities, which included five tea rooms, secured warehouses, an inner garden, and other spaces in which to relax, made it worthy of hosting important members of a daimyo's retinue.

The estate is still owned by descendants of the original Takakusa family, and it is a private home, but parts of the grounds are open for viewing on weekends. The current buildings are a mix of styles and eras, with most dating from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries.

A Mix of Past and Present

The *honjin* and *wakihonjin* stand at roughly opposite ends of the Yakage historic district, where Yakage's ongoing historical preservation and beautification efforts are on display.

The buildings along the main street feature architecture from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, and the mix of styles reflects changing tastes. For example, there are two common patterns in the roofs. Some buildings have gables over the front entrance, which is a style called *tsumairi*. Others use a *hirairi* style, with the gables to the sides of the building. Many places tend to use one style or the other, making the mix in Yakage unusual.

Despite the variation, raised stone foundations and outside wood paneling create a sense of stylistic unity. The town has enacted building codes requiring municipal approval for renovations and additions so that the changes contribute to the historical feel of the street. Telephone lines have been buried for much of the street's length, and road surfaces have been made to look like cobblestones. Most building entrances align with the street, and many have small signs explaining their history.

Several of the older structures along this street have been recently renovated as part of the beautification efforts, and some of the historical buildings now house hotels, restaurants, and gift shops. While the building exteriors preserve the original historical architecture, many of the interiors reflect modern tastes in comfort and design.