

THE 6TH SATOYAMA PRACTITIONERS NETWORKING EVENT

Satoyama × Creative
- Regional Culture and International Exchange -



City of Yamagata named The Japan Times' Destination Region 2025

The Japan Times has announced that Yamagata city, Yamagata Prefecture, has been selected as the Destination Region of the Year 2025, a new annual recognition given to a Japanese region that The Japan Times wishes to showcase to the world for its exemplary cultural, social and environmental initiatives.

The Destination Region program, launched with Koosuke Motani, the chief senior economist at The Japan Research Institute, as an adviser, identifies municipalities that are advancing sustainable regional development from three key perspectives:

1. Preserving and passing on their regions'

cultural and historical heritages to future generations.

2. Fostering sustainable local economies and communities that make effective use of regional resources.

3. Demonstrating the potential to contribute to solving regional and global challenges through their initiatives.

Yamagata city was chosen for its outstanding integration of culture, nature and creativity. The city is home to the internationally acclaimed Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra, as well as iconic destinations such as Mount Zao and the temple

Yamadara. Its vibrant culinary scene, rich in seasonal and regional flavors, further reflects Yamagata's deep connection to its natural environment. Part of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network, Yamagata embodies the values of innovation and sustainability that align with the goals of the Destination Region initiative.

Since 2018, The Japan Times has been promoting sustainable development through its Sustainable Japan Network, which highlights the efforts of Japanese companies, organizations and local governments. The network's activities include the Sustainable Japan Award and the Sustainable Japan Practitio-

ners Networking, launched in 2019. Each year, the forum selects one region to feature, organizing a two-day program of lectures, field visits and cultural exchange, followed by global media coverage through The Japan Times.

This year, the forum will take place in Yamagata city under the theme "Satoyama × Creative: Regional Culture and International Exchange." By showcasing the city's cultural richness, creative energy and deep-rooted traditions, The Japan Times aims to raise global awareness of Yamagata's appeal, strengthen inbound engagement and foster meaningful dialogue between Japan's regions and the wider world.

ジャパンタイムズは、毎年「その年、世界に紹介したい日本の地域」を選定し、The Japan Times Destination Region として認定しています。このたび、2025 年の認定地域として山形県山形市を選定しました。

Destination Region の選定にあたっては、日本総合研究所調査部主席研究員の篠谷浩介氏をアドバイザーに迎え、(1) 地域の文化的・歴史的背景を大切にし次世代へ継承していること、(2) 地域資源を活

用した持続可能な地域経済・コミュニティを追求していること、(3) その取り組みが日本や世界の地域課題の解決に貢献しうること、の 3 つの視点から評価しています。

山形市は、山形国際ドキュメンタリー映画祭や山形交響楽団など豊かな文化活動をはじめ、蔵王や山寺に代表される自然環境、そして「芋煮」に象徴される地域食文化など、独自の魅力を数多く有しています。

こうした資源を生かし、「文化創造都市」として持続可能な地域づくりを進めている点が高く評価され、今回の選定に至りました。

ジャパンタイムズでは 2018 年より、持続可能な企業・団体・地域の取り組みを発信する「Sustainable Japan Network」を展開し、Sustainable Japan Award や実践者交流会を通じて、全国各地の優れた事例を紹介してきました。

実践者交流会では、毎年 1 地域を選び、講演やスタディツアーを含む現地交流を実施。その成果を国内外に発信しています。

2025 年は、Destination Region に選ばれた山形市で、「Satoyama × クリエイティブ～地域文化と国際交流」をテーマに開催。山形の多様な文化・自然・人々の営みを通して、地域の新たな価値を再発見し、国内外の交流をさらに広げていくことを目指します。

Yamagata: Eco-friendly tradition, regeneration

MAIKO MURAOKA
Contributing writer



Kosuke Motani SENIOR RESEARCHER AT THE JAPAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The 6th Satoyama Practitioners Networking Event will be held on Nov. 1 and 2 in the city of Yamagata, which was selected this year as a Japan Times Destination Region — a new initiative to recognize Japanese municipalities that are contributing to regional sustainability.

Kosuke Motani, the chief senior economist at the Japan Research Institute Ltd. and an adviser to The Japan Times' Sustainable Japan Network, advises the initiative. Key points for selection include a commitment to passing on cultural and historical heritage, the pursuit of a sustainable economy and community through the use of local resources, and the potential to contribute to solving regional issues in Japan and globally.

Motani highlighted how Yamagata nurtures its culture by preserving its heritage. Many pseudo-Western-style structures built during the Meiji Era have been renovated, including the one that now houses the Yamagata City Local History Museum. Historic townscapes, many featuring irrigation canals, have also been preserved and incorporated into the city's urban development.

Efforts are underway to revitalize the historic castle area into an enjoyable and easily walkable district, and the number of pedestrian visitors accordingly increased from 22,400 in 2019 to 25,100 in 2024. Efforts to create a walkable urban environment elsewhere as well are among various city initiatives that likely contributed to citizens' healthy life expectancy increasing by 0.86 years for men and 0.61 years for women from 2013 to 2022, and average life expectancy has also increased.

Yamagata is known as a city of ramen, not just for its many ramen shops but also because many soba restaurants traditionally serve ramen as well. Another well-known delicacy is *imoni*, a taro stew cooked in large pots and enjoyed not only at home but also in groups at open spaces like riverbanks, a culinary tradition that has been preserved for



Momiji Park in Higashihara, Yamagata City YAMAGATA CITY

nearly 400 years.

Motani also said Yamagata's pursuit of a sustainable regional economy and community through leveraging local resources is noteworthy. "The city is collaborating with Tohoku University of Art and Design to advance projects to renovate existing buildings," he said. "In particular, I think the development of student dormitories using old buildings in the city center is a pioneering approach."

On the cultural front, the city is home to the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra, one of the 40 in the Association of Japanese Symphony Orchestras. The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, held since 1989, attracts filmmakers and participants from all over the world. Yamagata has been a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the film category since 2017.

In terms of education and child care, the city operates the Yamagata City Library and its four branches as well as facilities like Copal, a playground designed to welcome every child regardless of ability or background. It also runs consultation services to provide support for parents and families in collaboration with the nonprofit Florence.

Yamagata has also been trying to utilize natural resources more effectively. The central part of the city is in a basin that experi-

Kajo Park's Higashi-Otemon Gate, part of the restored Yamagata Castle grounds, was designated a National Historic Site in 1986. Today, it stands as one of Yamagata's most scenic destinations, renowned for its cherry blossoms and cultural significance.



ences heavy snow in winter and intense heat in summer, but its location on an alluvial fan also provides abundant groundwater that is used to melt snow on the streets in winter and cool road surfaces in summer. Furthermore, the city has introduced "groundwater-based air conditioning systems" in municipal facilities. Since groundwater maintains a stable temperature, unlike the outdoors air used by conventional air-conditioning systems, using groundwater for cooling in summer and heating in winter saves energy.

Motani said these initiatives have the

potential to contribute to solving regional issues not only in Japan but also around the world. "As urban decay progresses globally in car-centric societies, Yamagata's approach of directly addressing this through the regeneration of pedestrian spaces should serve as a model. At the same time, its efforts to promote seismic retrofitting of existing buildings and to renovate them for reuse stand out among other cities," he said. He also highly praised the city's eco-friendly initiatives utilizing local resources, as well as its focus on cultural richness and diversity.



The Yamagata Creative City Center Q1 serves as the foundation for sustainable urban development in Yamagata city, which has been recognized as a creative city with outstanding local assets. Q1 inc.

第6回里Satoyama実践者交流会は、11月1日と2日に山形市で開催されます。山形市は今年、「ジャパン・タイムズ デスティネーション・リージョン」に選定されました。これは、日本各地で地域の持続可能性に貢献する自治体を顕彰する新たな取り組みです。

このイニシアチブのアドバイザーを務めるのは、日本総合研究所の主席研究員であり、「サステナブル・ジャパン・ネットワーク」のアドバイザーでもある藻谷浩介氏です。

選定の主なポイントは、文化・歴史遺産の継承への取り組み、地域資源を活用した持続可能な経済・コミュニティの実現、そして日本や世界の地域課題の解決に貢献する可能性です。

藻谷氏は、山形が文化を大切に、遺産を守りながら育んでいる点を強調しました。明治時代に建てられた擬洋風建築の多くが改修されており、そのひとつは現在、山形市郷土館として使われています。また、

用水路を備えた歴史的な街並みも保存され、都市開発に活かされています。

現在、歴史ある城下町エリアを散策しやすく楽しい街区に再生する取り組みが進められており、歩行者来訪者数は2019年の22,400人から2024年には25,100人に増加しました。市内の他地域でも歩きやすい都市環境づくりが進められており、こうした取り組みは2013年から2022年の間に男性で0.86年、女性で0.61年、健康寿命が延びるなど、市民の健康にも良い影響を与えているとみられます。

山形市は「ラーメンの街」としても知られています。多くのラーメン店があるだけでなく、伝統的にそば店でもラーメンを提供する習慣があります。また、もう一つの名物ば芋煮です。大鍋で煮込む里芋の汁物で、家庭だけでなく河川敷などの屋外でも仲間と楽しむ文化が、約400年にわたり受け継がれています。

藻谷氏はまた、地域資源を活用して持続可能な経



The Risshaku-ji temple complex, formally known as Hoshu-zan Risshaku-ji and more widely recognized by its popular name Yamadera, meaning "mountain temple," is one of Yamagata's most iconic spiritual sites.

済・コミュニティを実現しようとする山形の姿勢も高く評価しました。

「山形市は東北芸術工科大学と連携し、既存建築の改修プロジェクトを進めています。特に、市中心部の古い建物を学生寮として再生する取り組みは先駆的だと思います」と語りました。

文化面では、山形交響楽団（日本オーケストラ連盟加盟40団体の1つ）や、1989年から開催されている山形国際ドキュメンタリー映画祭があり、世界中から制作者や参加者が集まります。山形市は2017年から、ユネスコ創造都市ネットワーク（映画分野）の加盟都市でもあります。

教育・子育て分野では、市立図書館と4つの分館のほか、障害や背景に関係なくすべての子どもを受け入れる遊び場「コバル」などの施設を運営しています。また、NPO法人フローレンスと連携し、保護者や家庭を支援する相談サービスも展開しています。

山形市は自然資源の有効活用にも取り組んでいます。市中心部は冬は雪が多く、夏は暑さが厳しい盆地に位置しますが、扇状地の地形により豊富な地下水があり、冬は道路の融雪、夏は路面冷却に使われています。さらに、市施設で「地下水利用型空調システム」を導入しています。地下水は外気と違って温度が安定しているため、夏は冷却、冬は暖房に利用することでエネルギーを節約できます。

藻谷氏は、これらの取り組みが日本だけでなく世界の地域課題解決にも貢献する可能性があるとして述べました。「車社会が進む都市の空洞化に対し、山形のように歩行者空間の再生で直接的に取り組む姿勢は、世界のモデルになるでしょう。同時に、既存建物の耐震化や再利用への改修も他都市にはない特徴です」と評価しました。また、地域資源を活用した環境配慮の取り組み、そして文化の豊かさや多様性への姿勢も高く評価しています。

Message from the mayor of Yamagata city

Takahiro Sato
MAYOR OF YAMAGATA CITY



It is my great honor to host the 6th Satoyama Practitioners Networking Event here in Yamagata.

Yamagata is a historic castle town that flourished under Lord Mogami Yoshiaki, who governed one of the largest feudal domains in northern Japan, valued at 570,000 *koku* of rice (enough to feed half a million people). The city is blessed with a wealth of history, nature and culture — from Mount Zao, famed for its ethereal “snow monsters” and hot springs, to the mountain temple of Yamadera, immortalized by the haiku master Matsuo Basho.

Our region is also deeply proud of its culinary traditions. One of Yamagata’s most

beloved dishes is *imoni* — a taro-and-meat hotpot dish traditionally cooked outdoors by rivers in autumn. Yamagata is also known for its exceptional fruits, such as cherries and La France pears, which embody the richness of our land and the care of our farmers.

In 2017, Yamagata city was designated a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the field of film — the first city in Japan to receive this recognition. This honor reflects more than three decades of dedication to fostering film culture through the internationally acclaimed Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, first held in 1989. It also acknowledges the work of the Yamagata Film Commission, which promotes film production in the region, and the presence of the Tohoku University of Art and Design, the only art university in northeastern Japan nurturing the next generation of visual storytellers.

Beyond film, Yamagata is home to the professional Yamagata Symphony Orchestra, traditional crafts such as Yamagata cast iron,

and a vibrant food culture boasting Japan’s highest per capita ramen consumption. By connecting these diverse cultural assets with other sectors, we strive to enhance their intrinsic value and realize our vision of a “creative cultural city” — one that builds a sustainable future through culture, innovation and collaboration.

We are deeply honored that Yamagata has been selected as one of The Japan Times’ Destination Regions 2025, recognizing cities that lead in sustainable regional development. I sincerely hope this Satoyama Practitioners Networking



Equestrian statue of Mogami Yoshimitsu in Kajo Park YAMAGATA CITY

Event will inspire dialogue, creativity and new pathways toward sustainable communities. I look forward to welcoming everyone to Yamagata and sharing the warmth and vitality of our city with you.

この度、第6回 Satoyama 実践者交流会を開催できますことを大変光栄に存じます。

山形市は、最上義光公が街並みの基礎を築いた57万石の城下町であり、樹氷や温泉で知られる「蔵王」、松尾芭蕉ゆかりの「山寺」、郷土料理の「芋煮」や「さくらんぼ」「ラ・フランス」など、多様な歴史、自然、食文化が魅力のまちです。

2017年にはユネスコ創造都市ネットワークに映画分野で加盟認定を受け、国内初となる映画分野での認定は、30年以上にわたり国際的評価を得る「山形国際ドキュメンタリー映画祭」、山形フィルム・コミッションによるロケ誘致、東北唯一の芸術系大学である「東北芸術工科大学」など、映像文化を育む環境の充実が評価されました。さらに、プロオーケストラの「山形交響

楽団」、消費額日本一を誇るラーメン文化、山形鑄物などの伝統工芸など、多彩な地域資産を有しています。

山形市では、こうした資産の価値を高め、文化と他分野の連携による新しい価値創出を通して、持続可能なまちを目指す「文化創造都市」の推進に取り組んでおります。

こうした取り組みや教育・子育て支援、「歩くほど幸

せになるまち」とコンセプトとしたまちづくりなどが評価され、山形市は The Japan Times Destination Region 2025 に選定されました。Satoyama 実践者交流会では、地域資産を基に新たな価値創出や持続可能な地域の実現に向けた活発な議論が繰り広げられることを心より期待しております。皆様と山形市でお会いできることを楽しみにしております。

The 6th Satoyama Practitioners Networking Event

Organized by the Sustainable Japan Network and the city of Yamagata

Theme: Satoyama × Creative

Dates: Nov. 1 (Sat.) and 2 (Sun.) Venue: Yamagata City Public Health Center Large Conference Room

Schedule for 6th Satoyama Practitioners Networking event

The Japan Times Sustainable Japan Network and the city of Yamagata will co-host the 6th Satoyama Practitioners Networking Event. This year’s event will focus on the theme “Satoyama × Creative: Regional Culture and International Exchange.” The program will feature a keynote speech by Kosuke Motani, as well as a panel discussion with Daisuke Nakayama, president of Tohoku University of Art and Design; Takahiro Sato, mayor of Yamagata City; and Hideki Nishihama, executive director of the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra. In addition, practitioners contributing to regional revitalization across Japan and local high school students will share their activities and achievements from the perspectives.

Day 1 SATOYAMA PRACTICAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM

13:30 Opening remarks

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Theme: Unlocking Regional Potential Through Culture

PANEL DISCUSSION 1

Theme: International Exchange Through Culture

PANEL DISCUSSION 2

Theme: Yamagata as a Chosen Destination: Regional Appeal

COMMUNITY PRESENTATION 1

Creative City Yamagata: Q1 Yamagata Creative City Center and Other Key Facilities (tentative)

COMMUNITY PRESENTATION 2 (high school students)

High School Students × Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival

Day 2 STUDY TOUR

8:30 Meet at Yamagata Station

SITES TO VISIT:

1. Nanokamachi Goten-zeki
2. Yamagata City Local History Museum
3. Yamagata Creative City Center Q1
4. Imoni Experience at Roadside Station Yamagata Zao
5. Hira-Shimizu no Sato

To register, please visit this URL.

* In Japanese only



Keynote speech,
Panel discussion 1 moderator
Kosuke Motani
Senior researcher at the Japan Research Institute, the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium adviser



Panel discussion 2 moderator
Yuto Yoshida
Former mayor of Yokosuka city
Glocal Government Relationz Co. Ltd. president



Panel discussion 1 panelist
Daisuke Nakayama
President, Tohoku University of Art and Design



Panel discussion 1 panelist
Asako Fujioka
Vice director, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival



Panel discussion 1 panelist
Hideki Nishihama
Executive director, Yamagata Symphony Orchestra



Panel discussion 2 panelist
Takahiro Sato
Mayor of Yamagata city



Panel discussion 2 panelist
Go Matsumoto
Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yamagata University



Panel discussion 2 panelist
Jessica Speed
Writer, The Japan Times

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The 6th Satoyama Practitioners Networking Event

Study tour: Site visit overview

Yamagata City Local History Museum

The Yamagata City Local History Museum is housed in the Old Saiseikan Hospital Building, a Western-style wooden structure completed in 1878 (Meiji 11), and is now an Important Cultural Property. Originally built as a prefectural hospital, it was transferred to private management in 1888 and became the main building of the municipal Saiseikan Hospital in 1904. The facility also once hosted a medical school, where Dr. Albrecht von Roretz, an Austrian, taught modern medicine – a significant step in bringing Western medical education to Japan.

In 1966, the building was designated by the national government as an Important Cultural Property. Following this recognition, it was carefully dismantled, relocated and reconstructed within Kajo Park, a historic site that once contained Yamagata Castle. The restoration was completed in 1969, and the building reopened in 1971 under its current name, Yamagata City Local History Museum. Today, the museum's first and second floors are open to the public, featuring exhibitions on regional history and medical heritage that offer insight into Yamagata's modernization and cultural evolution.



Yamagata Creative City Center Q1

The Yamagata Creative City Center Q1, known locally as just Q1, is a cultural hub that symbolizes Yamagata's vision as a UNESCO Creative City. The facility occupies the renovated building of the former Yamagata City Daiichi Elementary School, originally constructed in 1927 (Showa 2) as the first reinforced concrete building in Yamagata Prefecture. The name derives from Kyu Ichi Sho, short for Old Daiichi Elementary School. It also carries an additional layer of meaning: Just as "question one" marks the beginning of inquiry, Q1 aspires to be a place where creativity begins with curiosity – a space that encourages people to keep asking,

exploring and creating. Today, Q1 serves as a dynamic venue for art, design, education and community collaboration, reflecting Yamagata's ongoing commitment to cultural innovation and creative exchange. Influenced by German Expressionism and Art Deco, the building was one of Japan's most advanced architectural works of its time. Serving as an elementary school in central Yamagata for nearly 80 years, it was later recognized for its historical value and designated a Registered Tangible Cultural Property in 2001, as well as a Heritage of Industrial Modernization in 2009.

Hirashimizu no Sato
(Hirashimizu Village, Yamagata City)

Nestled at the foot of Mount Chitose in Yamagata city, Hirashimizu no Sato is a tranquil village renowned for its centuries-old pottery and craftsmanship. The area embodies the spirit of Yamagata's folk culture, where artisans continue to uphold the legacy of handmade beauty.

Kusakizome Kobo Kameya

At Kameya, local craftsmen apply time-honored techniques of plant-based dyeing (kusakizome) to create fabrics in natural hues. The workshop's dedication to slow, sustainable processes mirrors the same spirit of craftsmanship found in Hirashimizu's pottery – handmade, deeply rooted and enduringly beautiful.

Shichiemon Kiln

With a history of nearly 200 years, Shichiemon Kiln is one of the most prominent studios preserving the Hirashimizu-yaki pottery tradition. Using clay rich in iron sulfide sourced from nearby Mount Chitose, the kiln produces distinctive folk-style ceramics known for their warmth and rustic charm. Each piece reflects the deep connection between the artisans and the natural surroundings of Yamagata.

La Jomon

La Jomon specializes exclusively in junmai sake – pure rice sake made without the addition of distilled alcohol. The shop also offers limited-edition sakes available only through select retailers, along with a curated range of additive-free foods and condiments. Each product reflects a commitment to authenticity, purity and the quiet richness of Yamagata's culinary culture.



Nanokamachi Goten-zeki, one of the five historic irrigation canals of Yamagata known as the Yamagata Goseki, was redeveloped in 2010 and reborn as a charming commercial complex that blends traditional waterways with modern urban life. YAMAGATA CITY

Yamagata Hanagasa Festival

Andrew Lee
Contributing writer

Held in several locations throughout Yamagata Prefecture, the Hanagasa Festival sees people parade through the streets wearing sedge hats decorated with red flowers and dancing to the tune of the folk song "Hanagasa Ondo." The most famous of these is the Yamagata Hanagasa Festival, held in August in the city of Yamagata. The festival began during the period of rapid economic growth after World War II. Businessman Yoshio Hattori, then the president of the Yamagata Shimbun newspaper and others, proposed making the local dance a centerpiece of a summer tourism promotion, and in 1963 the Hanagasa Ondo Parade began. Two years later, the event assumed its current form

山形花笠まつり
スゲ笠に赤い花飾りをつけた花笠を手に、「花笠音頭」にあわせて街を踊り練り歩くという祭りが「花笠まつり」で、山形県内数か所で開催されている。なかでも有名なのが、例年8月に山形市で行われる

when it became independent as the Yamagata Hanagasa Festival. Along with the three major Tohoku festivals that predate World War II (Nebuta, Kanto and Sendai Tanabata), the postwar Yamagata Hanagasa Festival is sometimes known as one of the four major Tohoku festivals. It was even featured at the Festival Plaza venue (designed by Kenzo Tange) during the 1970 Osaka World Expo as part of a Japanese festival event.



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「山形花笠まつり」だ。祭りが始まったのは戦後の高度成長期。
当時、山形新聞の代表取締役社長などを務める実業家の服部敬雄が、地元の踊りを夏の観光の目玉として売り出すことを提唱し、1963年に夏まつりのイベン



ADOBE STOCK

トの1つとして「花笠音頭パレード」が始まった。その2年後の1965年に「山形花笠まつり」として独立し、現在のような祭りのスタイルとなった。
戦前から行われている東北三大祭り（「ねぶた」「竿燈」「仙台七夕」）に、戦後から始まり広まった「山形

花笠まつり」を加えた4つの祭りを加え、東北四大祭りと呼ばれることもある。
1970年の大阪万博では、メインイベント会場である「お祭り広場」（設計：丹下健三）で開催された日本の祭りイベントで、そのトップで出演したこともあった。

Yamagata’s Zao Onsen Ski Resort is a classic beauty

Andrew Lee
Contributing writer

Each year between mid-November and April, winter sports fans from around the world flock to Japan for the country’s renowned powder snow. Aussie snowboarders, in particular, have made Niseko in Hokkaido and Hakuba in Nagano their winter homes, escaping the hot summers Down Under.

But over the years, these well-known ski resorts — Nagano’s Nozawa Onsen is another — have become more foreign than Japanese as the towns adopted a more international vibe to cater to the influx of tourists.

One overlooked ski resort in Yamagata Prefecture, however, offers a more local experience, balancing its long history as an *onsen* town and sightseeing destination with some of the longest ski runs and best powder snow in Japan.

Zao Onsen Ski Resort, located in the city of Yamagata, has long been known for the photogenic “snow monsters” that inhabit its mountains in winter. Called *juhyō*, these surreal, otherworldly shapes form when freezing winds from the Sea of Japan coat fir trees with layers of ice and snow. With the rise of social media, the number of tourists visiting Zao simply to take a snap of this unique landscape has surged. But what many of these day-trippers overlook is the area’s excellent skiing opportunities and the charm of its traditional onsen hospitality.

The hot springs in Zao were discovered 1,900 years ago, and during the Edo Period, the waters became famous for their therapeutic benefits, thanks to their high sulfur content and natural acidity. Today, Zao Onsen is home to around 80 ryokan and hotels, many of which offer a classic onsen experience, with meals served in-room and private indoor or outdoor baths. Several public onsen are also available in town, including three unmanned bathhouses — two of which are on Takayu-dori street near the bus terminal.

This pleasant *shōtengai* (shopping street) has faced hard times in recent years, with many elderly shop owners closing their businesses — a trend hastened by the lack of customers during the pandemic. Recently, however, the street has been revitalized as a new generation of shopkeepers move in, bringing fresh ideas while carefully preserving its quaint Japanese charm.

At the lower end of Takayu-dori, you will find the newly established Manju Yunoka Cafe, which serves coffee and local special-

ties such as *manjū* (hot spring buns), and skewers of *tama konnyaku* (balls of konjac jelly simmered in soy sauce). In the evening the cafe transforms into a *tachinomi* (standing bar) for those looking for some apres-ski refreshments. Right next door is Zao Onsen Shokudo, a new venture by a chef from Tokyo that serves Japanese-style lunch sets (*teishoku*), with plans for fine dining at night in the near future.

Further along the street, which is heated in winter to ensure it remains clear of snow, is Zao Onsen Yutabiya Takayudo, which sells a variety of onsen-themed souvenirs from around Japan, and Takayu Onsen Parlor, where you can participate in traditional onsen activities such as table tennis or pick up a soda to drink while soothing your feet in the mineral-rich footbath across the road.

At the top of Takayu-dori are stairs leading to Sukawa Onsen Shrine, which are particularly beautiful in winter as steam from the hot springs adds a soft, misty atmosphere to the snow-covered scene — and gives a slightly eggy, but not unpleasant, aroma to the cold air.

It is this traditional onsen-town feel that sets Zao apart from other ski resorts in Japan, but the skiing and snowboarding here are also exceptional. With 32 lifts scattered across 14 slopes and 12 courses — including one that stretches 10 kilometers — Zao is one of the largest ski resorts in Japan, catering to skiers and snowboarders of all levels.

To see the juhyō, ride the Sanrokusen and Sanchusen ropeways to the top of the mountain, or book a Nightcruiser snow tractor ride to view the illuminated trees at night. On clear days, queues for the ropeway can stretch up to two hours, so purchasing a priority ticket online is highly recommended. From the top, you can either ride the lift back down or ski along the resort’s longest course, which takes you up close to the snow monsters. For regular runs, the less crowded Chuo Ropeway is a great option, and the Sora Mado 1387 Cafe offers breathtaking views of Diamond Valley, along with croissants that are simply enormous.

Another advantage Zao has over more remote ski resorts is its accessibility. After taking a shinkansen to Yamagata Station, it’s just a 30-minute drive to the resort, and buses are also available. This means staying at a hotel in the center of the city is a convenient option for travelers.

While in Yamagata, a day trip to the village of Yamadera is highly recommended. About a 40-minute drive from Zao, or just 16 min-



Zao Onsen is popular among locals and tourists for its ski slopes. YAMAGATA

utes on the Senzan Line from Yamagata Station, Yamadera (meaning “mountain temple”) is home to the historic Risshaku-ji Buddhist temple complex.

Visiting here in winter is magical. The mountain forest is blanketed in snow, and the temple buildings perched atop the cliffs appear to float among the frosted trees. At the entrance to the temple grounds sits the impressive Konpon Chudo Hall, the oldest cedarwood building in Japan and a designated Important Cultural Property. Built in 1356, the hall houses several Buddha statues over 1,000 years old and 600 volumes of Edo Period sutras. Risshaku-ji’s head priest, Seiden Kiyohara, explains that the temple is also home to the Eternal Flame, brought from Kyoto’s Enryaku-ji Temple 1,100 years ago, which has been kept burning ever since.

The grounds of Risshaku-ji once contained over 100 temple buildings, of which about 30 remain, including Okunoin Temple at the top of the 1,015 steps that wind their way up the mountain. It is said that as visitors ascend they are steadily released from their earthly desires, and it was along this path that the poet Matsuo Basho composed one of his best-known haiku: *Shizukesa ya / iwa ni shi-miiru / semi no koe* (Such stillness / the cica-das’ cries / sink into the rocks). There is a memorial stone at the spot where Basho stopped to write the haiku.

The icy steps can be treacherous in winter, but the one-hour climb is worth it for the stunning panorama at the top, which is like stepping into an ink painting of snow-capped temples and the wintry landscape of the val-

ley beyond.

In the town below there are plenty of places to rest after the hike. At Endo, a restaurant and souvenir shop across the river, a cute hand-drawn map by “The Lovely Shop Ladies of Yamadera” can be picked up and is full of local insight into the town. Make sure to try the *chikara* (power) *tama konnyaku* at Endo. Also on the map is Taimenseki, a restaurant known for its unique Basho-yaki *dango* (sweet dumplings), and Shoseido, a famous confectionery store selling *moroko-shi* sweets handmade from *adzuki* bean powder and sugar, which are then shaped using wooden molds with the word “Yamadera” on them. And Fumotoya on the main *shōtengai* serves the best cherry soft-serve ice cream — a must-try, as Yamagata is known for its *sakuranbo* cherries.

The pace of life seems slower in Yamagata. From relaxing in Zao’s onsens after an enjoyable day of skiing to the tranquility of the mountain hike at Yamadera, visitors are encouraged to slow down and take it all in. For those ready to trade Japan’s busy ski resorts for something more authentic, Yamagata offers a different kind of winter escape.



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The Japan Times on January 31, 2025

Yamagata film festival to gather documentaries from around world

Maiko Muraoka
Contributing writer

Yamagata Prefecture, lying roughly 300 kilometers north of Tokyo on the Sea of Japan side of the Tohoku region, is blessed with abundant nature in diverse terrain, including mountains, basins, plains and rivers. In addition to its agricultural products such as cherries and edamame and its 225 hot springs and ski resorts, Yamagata is known as a mecca of documentary films.

In the city of Yamagata, the prefectural capital, the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF) is held every two years, gathering fans from all over the world.

This year, it will be held from Oct. 9 to 16 at various venues throughout the city, including Yamagata Central Public Hall, Yamagata Citizens’ Hall, the Forum Yamagata movie theater and Yamagata Creative City Center Q1. The nonprofit festival’s chairperson, Itaru Kato, and YIDFF Tokyo Office Director Haruka Hama spoke about the appeal of this film festival.

The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival began in 1989 as part of the 100th anniversary celebrations of the city’s establishment. Unlike most anniversary events, what makes this festival truly remarkable is that it has continued for 36 years, consistently attracting about 22,000 visitors from around the world.

Kato said that even before the film festival began, there was already a vibrant community of people who organized independent screenings. “In urban areas, there are many movie

theaters where you can watch the films you like as well as the latest releases, but in rural areas, there were few movie theaters, and it was not possible to see popular films right away,” he said. In response, citizens invested in establishing Forum Yamagata. This initiative has since expanded across the Tohoku region, forming the Forum Cinema Network.

“The city is relatively small, so the entire town is enveloped in the atmosphere of the film festival during the festival week,” Kato said. Foreigners become a common sight around the city, and lively discussions about films among fans and industry professionals can be heard in every shop. “The fact that the townspeople have also come to enjoy this atmosphere is one of the reasons why the film festival has continued for so long,” he said.

One feature of the festival that has become famous is its temporary Komian Club, a social hub that operates in the Japanese-style restaurant Sanjusangendo at the Washington Hotel Yamagata Nanokamachi. The charge is ¥500 (\$3.50), which includes one drink and snacks. “Why do people come all the way to Yamagata? It is because they want to enjoy conversations with other visitors after watching movies,” Kato said.

“In addition to the Q&A sessions for directors and the audience at the venues, one of the attractions of this film festival is that there are many opportunities to meet people outside theaters, such as running into a director of a film that left a strong impression on you at the Komian Club or elsewhere in town,” Hama said.

A new civic hall that is scheduled to open



2023 sayonara party YAMAGATA INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

in 2029 will also become one of the venues for the festival and a place for people to gather and interact.

Hama said serendipitous encounters with new films are a major joy of the festival, especially in an age when people tend to seek out only the information they want. This year’s YIDFF International Competition received 1,318 entries from 129 countries. Fifteen of them will be screened during the festival, competing for five awards. Hama noted that screenings will also be held in Tokyo the year after the festival, and that many award-winning films from past competitions can be rented.

A program named New Asian Currents will feature about 20 Asian documentaries. This year’s special programs include Unscripted: The Art of Direct Cinema, an experimental documentary methods developed in the U.S. in the 1960s, and Palestine — Memory of the Land, focusing on personal histories relating

to the current issues in the region.

The program Yamagata and Film includes records of the first festival. While some of these have been previously released, this new collection also brings together and digitizes parts that have never been made public.

“Amid various circumstances — including some countries being at war or having political situations that make visits impossible — I hope that this film festival will continue to function as a safety net where people from various countries can gather and talk,” said Hama.



Published in Sustainable Japan by
The Japan Times on Aug. 25, 2025

Dewaya: Pure flavors of local northern cooking

Robbie Swinnerton
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The town of Nishikawa, home to the Dewaya restaurant and inn, is about 40 minutes by car from Yamagata Station. Nestled in the foothills of the famous Mount Gassan, the town receives a lot of snow even for Japan's snowy northern region, sometimes piling up to more than 5 meters by February. The population is just under 5,000 people. Sericulture, forestry and mining once thrived in the area but have since declined, now replaced by the tourism industry, which centers on summer hiking, spring skiing and hot springs on and around Mount Gassan.

Dewaya was established in 1918 as an inn serving ascetics traveling to the Three Mountains of Dewa — Mount Gassan, Mount Yudono and Mount Haguro — which are objects of veneration for followers of Shugendō and other mountain-worshipping religions. Haruki Sato is the fourth generation to carry on the family business, learning his trade at a high-end Japanese restaurant in Tokyo and elsewhere before returning home to Nishikawa in 2013.

「出羽屋」がある西川町は JR 山形駅から車で約 40 分。月山の麓にある非常に雪深い場所だ。そんな町で「出羽屋」は、山岳信仰の対象である出羽三山への行者をもてなす宿として 1918 年に創業した。その 4 代目、

“The first thing I did was build connections with traditional hunters, skilled foragers of wild vegetables and other local food producers. That strengthened my commitment to making the natural abundance of Mount Gassan and wild vegetable dishes the focus of the restaurant,” he said.

In spring, the menu features as many as 30 types of wild vegetables. In summer, guests feast on bamboo shoots picked on Mount Gassan, sweet-and-salty glazed butterbur stems, and *ayu* (sweetfish) and *kajika* (sculpin) from the rivers. In fall there are wild mushrooms and nuts, and in winter wild game makes an appearance.

Accommodation and two meals starts at ¥19,800 (\$150) per night. Restaurant service alone is available starting at ¥6,600 for either lunch or dinner. The “chef’s table” package, including one night’s accommodation and two meals prepared personally by Sato, starts at ¥38,500, or ¥19,800 for one meal without accommodation. This latter option is of course popular with foodies. The literal chef’s table is a counter made of ancient zelkova wood, newly refurbished in January 2023. At the time of this interview in January, the 12-course meal included tur-

佐藤治樹は東京の料亭などで腕を磨いた後、実家に戻り、家業を継ぐ。自らも料理長を務める佐藤は、「山菜採りの名人やマタギなど、地元の生産者との交流に取り組みました。その結果、改めて月山の恵み、山菜



nips and spinach grown by Sato’s brother Akina, who is the assistant chef at the restaurant. The vegetables, harvested from beneath deep snow, were incredibly sweet. The meal included many local dishes available only here, such as an unusual moss called “hermit’s mist” that grows on beech trees, served in a walnut sauce, as well as simmered pheasant and hotpot of Asiatic black bear supplied by traditional hunters.

料理をメインにしようと思った」と語る。そこには、同じ山形県でも北前船の寄港地として栄えた海沿いの酒田などと異なり、貧しかった地域ならではの先人の知恵が生かされている。山菜は乾燥や塩漬け

Selected for *Destination Restaurants 2022*

Unlike coastal Yamagata cities such as Sakata that thrived in the Edo Period as ports of call for the *Kitamaebune* shipping route, Nishikawa was an impoverished mountain area until the bubble years of the 1980s. The food prepared at Dewaya draws on the knowledge of earlier generations who lived through hard times. Wild vegetables harvested in spring were dried or salted for use in winter. Because people could not afford kombu or katsuobushi (dried bonito) to make flavorful broth, they used plenty of mushrooms and wild vegetables to add umami. These are the pure flavors of local cooking, distinct from the Kyoto-style cuisine that became popular throughout Japan following World War II. It is Sato’s enduring aim to share this “flavor of the mountains” with the wider world.

Dewaya
58 Mazawa, Nishikawamachi,
Nishimurayama-gun, Yamagata Prefecture
<https://www.dewaya.com>

Published in Sustainable Japan Magazine by
The Japan Times on Feb. 25, 2023

にして保存し、通年使用。高価な昆布も鰹節も買えなかったがゆえに具沢山にして、旨味を抽出する。京料理とは異なる郷土の味を世界に発信するため、佐藤は奮闘を続けている。

French cuisine in Yamagata, home of ‘brand’ foods

Taeko Terao
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Over the past 20 years, French restaurants in regional areas of Japan have improved dramatically in quality while also increasing in number. Even today, however, the Tohoku region has relatively few. Restaurant Pas Mal could be called the sole authentic French restaurant in the city of Yamagata. Owner-chef Yusuke Murayama strives for true gastronomic cuisine. His dishes emphasize classic sauces making extensive use of wine and brandy — a cooking style that has become less common even in France — and the “stars” of these creations are local ingredients. For regional restaurants, using fresh and inexpensive locally sourced ingredients is usually considered an advantage, but the situation in Yamagata is different.

Murayama said: “Starting with cherries and Yamagata beef, foods produced in Yamagata are considered premium-quality brands and distributed at high prices outside the prefecture, especially in the Tokyo area. In these circumstances, they can’t be used at restaurants in the local area, where prices are lower. When local residents go out to eat, they almost always go to an *izakaya* pub where the average cost per person is ¥4,000

『レストラン パ・マル』は山形市にある唯一の本格フレンチ。場所は JR 山形駅から車で約 10 分。オーナーシェフ、村山優輔は高級ブランドとして県外に高値で流通するため、地元では入手しづらい食材を料理の主

to ¥5,000 (\$27 to \$34). It has become the norm in these places to use a lot of products from overseas, including vegetables. In other words, Yamagata residents have few opportunities to enjoy Yamagata ingredients when they dine out. I want to change this situation. First of all, I create dishes with the idea that local people should know about the appeal of ingredients from Yamagata Prefecture.”

Featured in these dishes are the bounties of the region, which is blessed with the right conditions for producing delicious foods — the presence of the sea and the mountains as well as extremes of temperature. Sangenton pork and Shonai duck from Hirata Farms are used to make rillettes (spreadable pate). Spear squid is featured in tarts. Main dishes include *amadai* (tilefish) and venison. Edible chrysanthemums, long grown in the region, appear as a garnish. Locally grown almonds and raspberries are used as well. Also on the menu is the local dish *imoni* (a soup including taro, meat and vegetables), made with consommé instead of the traditional soy sauce — an ingenious fusion of local ingredients and French cuisine.

Murayama opened a bistro in the city of Tendo in 2002. When he moved to his current location and reopened in 2017, he changed course and transformed the bistro into a gourmet French restaurant. The establishment is

役に据える。地元客にこそ、山形食材の魅力を知ってほしいからだ。村山は 2002 年に天童市でビストロを始め、2017 年に現在地に移転リニューアル。その際、ガストロノミー路線に変更。ディナーコースで ¥11,000



managed mainly by Murayama and his younger brother Tatsuaki, the maitre d’, who was previously engaged in wine production overseas. At ¥11,000 and ¥16,000 (including tax and service), the dinner course prices are extraordinarily high for the city of Yamagata.

“I want to raise the average dining cost throughout Yamagata Prefecture,” said Murayama. “Last May it was reported that the population of Yamagata Prefecture was a little over 1,040,000. That was a decrease of 1.31% from the previous year — the fourth-largest rate of decrease in Japan. The only way to do business in this situation is to make excellent

～（税・サ込み）は市内では圧倒的に高額だ。「山形県の飲食の客単価を上げたいんです。人口減少率が全国 4 位でも、いい料理を作れば、お客さんが来てくれることを若い世代に伝えたい」（村山）

Selected for *Destination Restaurants 2023*

cuisine that draws tourists. Yamagata specialties like ramen and soba are fine, too, but I think gastronomic restaurants really have the power to attract customers from far away. What I want to communicate to the younger generation is not that you can make more money in Tokyo, but that you can also make a living in Yamagata Prefecture. I often tell young chefs who have trained in Tokyo and come back to Yamagata, ‘I’m raising my prices, so you should raise yours too.’”

People from outside the prefecture (mainly the Tokyo area) currently comprise 80% of the restaurant’s clientele, but the number of local customers is increasing. To further raise awareness among the area’s residents, Murayama periodically carries out collaborations with famous chefs from other regions and reports on them inside and outside the prefecture. Without a doubt, Yamagata Prefecture’s future culinary scene is in the process of transforming.

Restaurant Pas Mal
2-3-16, Nanuka-machi, Yamagata-shi,
Yamagata Prefecture
<https://yamagatafrench-pasmal.com>

Published in Sustainable Japan Magazine by
The Japan Times on Dec. 23, 2023

現在、県外からの客が 8 割だが、地元客も増えつつある。さらなる山形県民の意識改革のため、村山は他地域の有名シェフとのコラボレーションも定期的に行い、県内外に発信を続ける。

the japan times

Destination Restaurants 2025

AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

OSTERIA SINCERITÀ



Opened in April 2023, the restaurant Stanza della Sincerità is part of the tiny three-room hot spring inn Osteria Sincerità in Yamagata Prefecture’s Okitama region. Chef Makoto Harada is attracting attention with dishes created using Yamagata beef and other locally produced ingredients.

3005, Akayu, Nanyo, Yamagata Prefecture
<https://osteria-sincerita.com/jp/>

For more information on
Destination Restaurants,
please scan.



the japan times

Destination Restaurants

- Hokkaido**

 - 1 French
Chimikepp Hotel
 - 2 Italian
Yoichi Sagra
 - 3 Wild game
Elezo Esprit
- Aomori Pref.**

 - 4 Italian
Casa del Cibo
- Iwate Pref.**

 - 5 Japanese
Tonoya-Yo
- Akita Pref.**

 - 6 Japanese
Nihonryori Takamura
- Yamagata Pref.**

 - 7 Japanese
Dewayu
 - 8 French
Restaurant Pas Mal
- Fukushima Pref.**

 - 9 Innovative
Hagi
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 - 10 French
Otowa Restaurant
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 - 11 Italian
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Restaurant Uozen
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Satoyama Jujo
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Tokiwasushi
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Mauvaise herbe

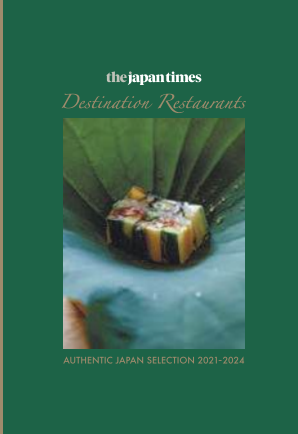
A list of the best restaurants in Japan, selected by Japanese experts with international diners in mind.

In 2021, The Japan Times created the Destination Restaurants list around the idea of Japanese experts uncovering top local restaurants for people around the world — hidden gems that not only offer unique culinary experiences but also contribute to community revitalization, sustainable food and the promotion of natural resources.

We aim to differentiate ourselves from other selections by bringing countryside talent proper recognition.

This book, marking the fourth anniversary of the Destination Restaurants project, is a compilation of the finest restaurants we have selected so far.

the japan times PUBLISHING



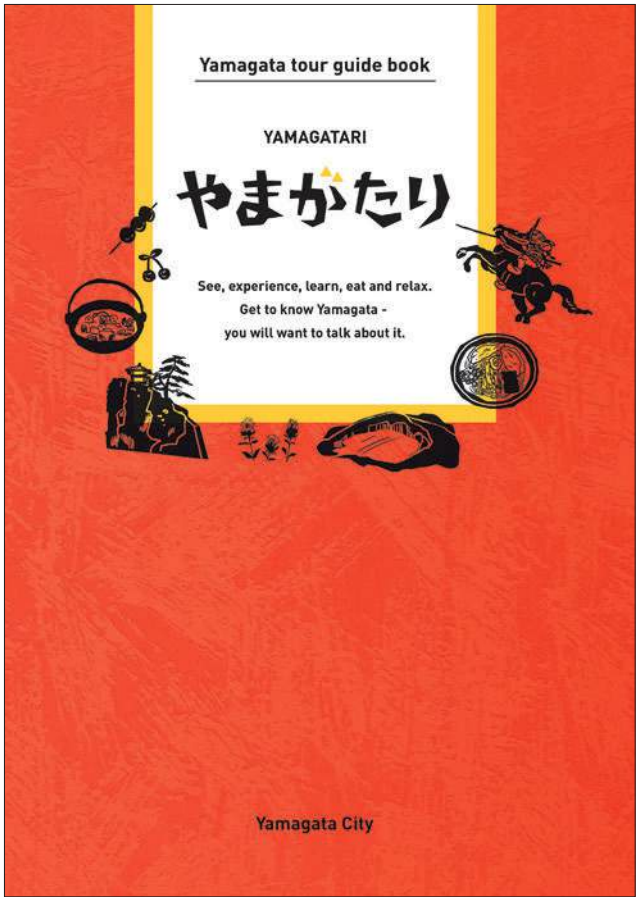
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YAMAGATA TRAVEL INFORMATION



Yamagata Tour Guide Book "YAMAGATARI"



STAY YAMAGATA
The official tourism website of Yamagata, Japan



YAMAGATA Jyuni Kagetsu
Yamagata City Tourism Association Official Website



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