

# The Town of Hayakawa

[ Cindy Liu ]

Deeply nestled between the mountains of the Minami Alps in the most western region of Yamanashi Prefecture is the secluded town of Hayakawa-chō. Despite its small size, Hayakawa-chō is a culturally significant place to both Yamanashi Prefecture and Japan as a whole. Even in a country notable for its shrinking population, with only an estimated 1,100 inhabitants, Hayakawa-chō is famous for being the town with the smallest number of people. Yet, its geographical isolation and dwindling number of residents only serves to add to its appeal. Hayakawa-chō has been recognized by The Association of The Most Beautiful

Villages in Japan, and rightly so. It is also the only town in Yamanashi Prefecture to have made the rankings.

Surrounded by rolling green mountains in its backdrop and wholly devoid of tall metropolitan buildings, Hayakawa-chō retains a unique old world charm. The town is abundant in history, and the beautifully preserved inns of Akasawa-shuku pulls in visitors even from far away prefectures. Also located in Hayakawa-chō is the world's oldest inn, the Keiunkan of Nishiyama Onsen, as certified by the Guinness World Records.

Opened in 705 CE, the inn dates back a remarkable 1300 years. In addition to the Nishiyama Onsen, there are also numerous other impressive hot springs for the weary traveller to rest.

## Akasawa

Like many other towns in Japan, Hayakawa-chō is actually a conglomeration of several villages which have steadily united since the Edo Period. The name comes from the Hayakawa River that runs through the area. A major tourist attraction of Hayakawa-chō is the historical area of Akasawa-shuku, where centuries-old inns remain beautifully intact. The area was designated under the Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings in 1993.

Akasawa began as a resting stop for those braving the pilgrimage to the nearby Kuon Temple of Mount Minobu, as well as the sacred Mount Shichimen, during the Edo Period. These two locations are designated as holy grounds to the Nichiren sect of Buddhism, and thus, the Edo Period saw countless pious travellers come this way. The steep incline of the mountains made for a difficult journey, and the village provided a brief respite. As such, it was known to be a lively religious town with numerous inns operating specifically for pilgrims. It became customary for travellers to stay the night in Akasawa after visiting Kuon Temple, and to continue onto Mount Shichimen the following day. The inns of Akasawa hold significant historical and cultural value for Yamanashi Prefecture.



Today, nearly all of the inns are no longer operating. However, some buildings remain open for visitors to enter and browse.

One of these is the inn Kikuya. On the first floor is a Japanese hearth used for heating and cooking, a commonplace sight in traditional homes. Oftentimes, the lever for raising and lowering the kettles is delightfully shaped like a fish, as you are able to see at Kikuya. The



upstairs balcony is also open, and from there you can see all over the rest of Akasawa. On a warm sunny day, the balcony makes for a great place to relax and sip green tea.

The idyllic scenery in Akasawa makes it easy to leave your worries behind in the city. The small, cobblestone pathway sloping upwards, lined with rustic wooden inns on either side, makes for a breathtaking scene. It is not difficult to imagine why travellers of today, just like travellers of the Edo Period, undertake the difficult trip in order to see Akasawa. One cannot help but be charmed by its simple beauty.

## Kagiya Cafe

Before heading into the hot springs district, a well-worthy stop for hungry travellers is the Kagiya Cafe. Kagiya is a homey little cafe/museum inside an old fashioned Japanese building. They offer a variety of savoury meals, desserts, and drinks, many of which utilize Hayakawa's locally grown ingredients. These ingredients include Nishiyama beans, Hakuho miso, Amebatake tea leaves, and mountain grapes. A personal recommendation on the menu is the Amebatake black tea, an aromatic and light black tea fitting for any of the desserts on the menu. Dessert and drink sets are also available. Furthermore, Kagiya also has a space dedicated to exhibitions about Hayakawa, ideal for browsing after your meal.



## Nishiyama Onsen

Besides its historical district, Hayakawa-chō is also famous as a hot springs town. Hayakawa-chō's distinctive geography is the source of its abundance of hot springs. The town lies on a tectonic fault line, named the Itoigawa-Shizuoka Tectonic Line, and emerging from the crevices of the two tectonic plates is the natural hot spring water special to this area.

Hayakawa-chō has been recognized as a source of hot springs water for over 1300 years. The world's oldest inn, Keiunkan, opened in 705 CE, is evidence of that. It is certified by the Guinness World Records as the oldest inn in the world.



Keiunkan prides itself on preserving traditional practices, as passed down through its long history. The hot spring water of Keiunkan is completely unaltered from its source, drawn without any reheating, and remains at an optimal temperature of 52 ° C. There is a constant flow of new water flowing into the baths, so guests can bathe comfortably. Keiunkan's dedication to this principle is clear: from the communal hot springs to the showers in the private rooms, all the water used in Keiunkan is unaltered natural hot spring water. Even if you are just passing by Keiunkan, there is a small fountain outside the inn to try the water. It smells faintly of sulphur as a testament to



its authenticity, yet not overwhelmingly so.

At Keiunkan, there are six different hot springs for guests to enjoy, and each is unique. The most iconic bath is the Mochitani no Yu. The bath itself is made of Japanese umbrella pine: soft on the skin and fragrant, especially suitable for women. It is an outdoor bath so guests can gaze at the stars while relaxing.

Keiunkan also has three other gorgeous outdoor baths: Hakuho no Yu, Kawaoto, and Seoto. The Hakuho no Yu is special in that it is made of a type of stone called Hakuho, taken from the Hayakawa River. Kawaoto and Seoto are large outdoor stone baths only available

by reservation. The last two baths, Ishikaze and Hinokikō, are indoor baths located on the very top floor of Keiunkan. Ishikaze is made of stone, while Hinokikō is made of a 2000 year old cypress tree. Both offer an outstanding view over the river below.

Hayakawa-chō also has many other onsen to explore. There is the Narata Onsen, which draws water from what stories tell us used to be the Empress Koken's (718 - 770 CE) favourite hot springs spot. Other hot springs include Kougen no Sato Onsen, Villa Amebatake, Kusashio Onsen, Ōtaki Onsen, and Shichimensan Onsen.

I invite visitors to Yamanashi Prefecture to travel the off-beaten path and visit Hayakawa-chō. No matter the season, the scenery has something new to offer. The town will undoubtedly give you an unforgettable cultural and scenic experience unique to beautiful Yamanashi.



Cindy is currently an Assistant Language Teacher under the JET Programme. On regular days, she teaches English at a senior high school in Kofu. On weekends, she enjoys exploring the prefecture, eating delicious Yamanashi fruit, and appreciating all the nature that Yamanashi has to offer. She is from Vancouver, Canada, where mountains and forests are aplenty. Yamanashi, where mountains and forests are also abundant, is like a home away from home to her.