

北の大地からワイン県やまなしへの引っ越し **Discovering Yamanashi**

In the summer of 2022, I moved from the cold and vast Hokkaido prefecture to the home of Mt. Fuji, Yamanashi prefecture. Within only a few months of living here I have discovered some local gems, met some amazing people and hiked some impressive mountains.

Here are three things in particular that have piqued my interest in Yamanashi.



Lucia Maggio

International Relations Coordinator
Yamanashi Prefectural Government

Otengusan Kofun: A Tomb with a View

Kofun, megalithic tombs built from the 3rd to 7th centuries, dot the islands of Japan. From tombs built by Martians to the holders of national secrets, they are the subject of many conspiracies due to the fact that most are off limit to tourists and even archeologists in the name of cultural preservation, and thus have laid untouched for hundreds of years.

Compared to Hokkaido which has a grand total of zero *kofun*, Yamanashi is home to 651 *kofun* with many dating from around the 5th to 6th centuries. Otengusan Kofun, measuring at 30m in diameter and 6m in height, stands proudly as the largest *kofun* of its kind in Yamanashi, characterized by its round shape and exterior made of thousands of medium-sized stones.

With its owner and date of construction still unknown, Otengusan Kofun is as mysterious as any *kofun*. To access it, you must find the semi-hidden trail at the back of Omiya shrine and climb 490 meters to the top of Mt. Tengu. Covered with multiple stone pillars and smaller shrines the *kofun* reminded me of the Ancient One from the Neverending Story, a wise and giant tortoise the size of a hill covered with moss and trees. Climbing over the great beast, the trail continues further up another mountain.

Venturing an hour longer, the thick forest suddenly opens up to reveal the Kofu basin and a proud Mt. Fuji standing in the far-off distance. You begin to understand why the great men of the past wished to be put to rest on such a magnificent mountain range.

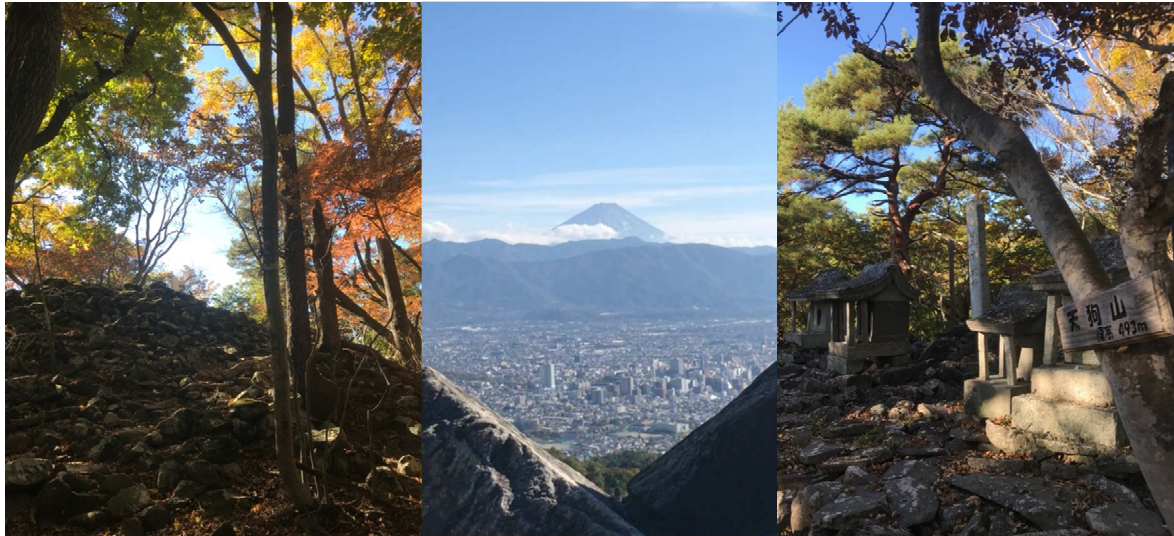


Photo 1 : Otengusan Kofun

Photo 2 : Mountain Fuji and the Kofu basin

Photo 3 : Shrines and steles

Katsunuma Grape Festival: Yamanashi's Harvest Festival

I have a confession to make: I used to hate grapes with a passion. I disliked their shape, their texture and had avoided them and the people who consumed them like the plague for over 20 years. This all changed when I moved to Yamanashi.

My first grape in years happened to be Yamanashi's most-prized grape: the Shine Muscat. Seedless, with a supple green skin and an incredibly sweet taste, this Shine Muscat introduced me to a whole new world. Open to further exploring this newfound interest, I decided to check out Katsunuma's Grape Festival.

Home to over 80 wineries producing 40% of Japan's wine, Yamanashi is aptly dubbed the "Wine Prefecture". Katsunuma, a quaint little town in the East of Yamanashi known as the wine capital of Japan, is not only the site of a historic battle that led to the restoration of the Meiji emperor, but also the place where grapes were first planted in Japan, as legend has it. Every October, Katsunuma holds the "Kōshu-Katsunuma Grape Festival" to celebrate the year's harvest and share gratitude for nature's bounty. In this spirit of sharing, local wineries offer free tastings, and 2,000 kg worth of free Koshu grapes are given out to festival goers. In addition to wine and grapes, food stalls selling food that paid well with wine line the streets, limited-edition grape-themed *omamori* (amulets) are sold, and performances are held throughout the day. This year, as a new feature of the festival, for only 1,000 yen you could buy a day pass for the "Katsunuma One-day Bus" that made the rounds to over 20 local wineries.

At night, Katsunuma middle school students perform a short ceremony with torches in hand before going up the side of a small mountain to light *gomaki* (wood with prayers writing on them) in the shape of a shrine gate. This *tori-yaki* or firing

shrine gate, is said to be a ritual from the Edo period carried out by the nearby Daizenji Temple, also known as the Grape Temple (“*Budō-ji*”). The festival ends with a bang as fireworks light up the night sky, pairing beautifully with the firing shrine gate.



Photo 4 : Grape vines at the train station



Photo 5 : A basket of grapes



Photo 6: Firing shrine gate

Kōshu Inden: A 300-year-old History of Craftsmanship

Worried about what to bring back home from your trip to Yamanashi? Well look no further. Yamanashi’s lacquered deer leather products or Kōshu inden make for the perfect souvenir for your family or friends. From wallets to handbags to business card holders, *inden* are a variety of leather products made from deer skin and decorated with a lacquered patterns such as cherry blossoms, irises and an important symbol of Yamanashi: Mt. Fuji. *Inden* with a dragonfly pattern are some of the most popular products as dragonflies, insects that can only fly forwards and not backwards, are a symbol of good fortune in business.

Light, durable and waterproof, *inden* was widely used to decorate Japanese armor during the Warring States period (1467-1568). From a turtle shell design to an iris design, the added ornamental layer of lacquer both served to strengthen the fabric itself and symbolically protecting the wearer from bad luck and disease. Takeda Shingen, Yamanashi’s beloved feudal lord, is also believed to have used a case made of Koshu lacquered deer leather to store his armor. The use of *inden* among the warrior class soon led to the wider usage of deer skin products amongst the general population and the development of more designs.

In 1987, Kōshu inden was designated as a “traditional craft” by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. While *inden* used to be produced in other regions, Yamanashi’s Kōshu inden is the only one to survive till this day. Inden-ya, Japan’s

oldest *inden* store, was one of three workshops in 1710 said to be the beginning of Kōshu inden. The main store is located at about a 15 minute walk away from Kofu station and has a small museum on the second detailing the history of *inden* production in the region.



Photo 7 : Inden-ya



Photo 8 : Statue of Takeda Shingen



Photo 9 : Business card holder

From the historical town of Hakodate to the great national park of Shiretoko, I have explored almost every corner of Hokkaido. Although my time there will always hold a special place in my heart, I am very excited for my next chapter in Yamanashi prefecture. Even after only being in here for a few months, I can see that Yamanashi has a lot to offer and I have only barely scratched the surface. Come join me on my journey through the land of *kofun*, delicious fruits and traditional hand crafts!