

Tourism in Hida Takayama: Past, Present & Future

By Jillian Yorke



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The Path to Peace?

On the evening of Aug. 2, 1945, American B29 planes flew over Takayama city in Gifu Prefecture to drop fliers, on which was a list, in Japanese, of 12 regional cities, including Mito, Toyama, and Takayama, that were about to be bombed. (I have a copy; the wording is stark and brusque.) The fliers advised residents to leave the area as quickly as possible. Although most of the cities on the list were indeed attacked, fortunately Takayama was spared, resulting in the city's later biggest tourist attraction – its intact old buildings and ancient festival floats. The common slogan “Tourism is a passport to peace”, originating in a 1966 session of the United Nations General Assembly, can be interpreted as meaning both that peace is a prerequisite for tourism, and that tourism itself creates a more peaceful world. If the planned bombing had taken place, Takayama's existence as it is today, including its vibrant tourist industry, would have been impossible (Photo 1).

Historically, tourism in Takayama focused on the town's two famous annual festivals, jointly considered one of the three most beautiful festivals in Japan, and designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016. In 1979, the Sanmachi district of the city was designated a traditional building area (*denkenchiku*). Thereafter the city became a thriving tourist hotspot, a completely unexpected phenomenon for local residents. Previously, the main tourist areas in Japan had been those with celebrated historical shrines and Buddhist

temples, as typified by former capitals Kyoto and Nara. In comparison, Takayama's old town districts have nothing but ordinary homes, which aren't even especially old. It was a startling revelation for local people to discover that even these could provide a source of income. Below I look at Takayama's history, trace its transformation over recent decades into a tourist destination, and consider prospects for the city's post-pandemic tourism revival.

Photo 1: Hitoshi Morishita



A typical Takayama scene: two bridges over Miya River

Early History

Hida Province was ruled by the Takayama domain, with the Kanamori clan as its feudal lords from 1568. The first *daimyo*, Nagachika Kanamori, built a castle in 1588 and organized the town in the surrounding area. The merchant houses constructed then comprise the current old area of the city (*furui machinami*), while the temples and shrines to the east, named Higashiyama after the Kyoto temple district, now constitute a popular 4-kilometer walking course. The streets and divisions created in those days, in the same grid pattern as Kyoto's, are still basically the same today – making Takayama an easy city to find your way around, enhanced by its relatively small, compact size.

Takayama became the economic and administrative center of the Hida region. In 1692, the Edo shogunate ordered the Kanamori clan to leave, the castle and samurai homes were demolished, and the province was placed directly under the control of the shogunate, for geopolitical reasons. Both Kanamori and the powerful Maeda clan, which ruled over most of the neighboring district of Hokuriku, were *tozama daimyo* or “outside lords”, and the shogunate wanted to avoid a possibly threatening collaboration between the two clans. Perhaps it also sought control over the region's rich forest resources.

Takayama Jinya, the magistrate's office established then (designated a national historic landmark in 1929), is Japan's only example of a provincial governor's office with an extant main building. Takayama's development thereafter centered on the “assembly of masters”, a group of merchants, up until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. As a result of the amalgamation of numerous small towns and villages in the area in 2005, Takayama became Japan's largest city, stretching 55 km north-south and 81 km east-west, with an area of 2,177.67 km², about the same size as metropolitan Tokyo.

My Own Connection

I first visited Hida Takayama (as it came to be known once the tourist boom took off) overnight en route to the 2005 Aichi Expo. I felt a powerful connection with the city and knew, deep in my bones, that I'd be back. A couple of years later indeed I was, as the invited speaker at a meeting of the Hida Takayama Japan New Zealand Society. An encounter there with my now-husband Hitoshi (then-secretary of the society) became the central relationship of my life. Our connection with Takayama is ongoing, as Hitoshi owns the family home there, and we generally return to the town, from our base in New Zealand, every

February and August.

I feel privileged to be able to experience both mid-winter and mid-summer in Takayama, with their dramatic contrasts. In February, we are busy with snow clearing, a precarious procedure that entails Hitoshi's shoveling the snow off the steep roof onto the street below, where I disperse it on the road or in the nearby river as quickly as I can, while apologizing to passing traffic. August is marked by summer events of all kinds, and Obon with all its elaborate rituals, including thoroughly cleaning and decorating the two family graves. Deepening my relationship with Takayama has opened my eyes to just how Tokyo-centric modern Japanese culture often is, with the capital tending to be "the default option".

In 2004, both the main house and the *kura* (storehouse) of Hitoshi's home in Shimo-ninomachi, which were built in 1902, were named "designated traditional buildings" and the surrounding area became the town's second *denkenchiku* (Photo 2). Just before the start of the Covid pandemic in 2019, extensive termite damage was found in the house. Fortunately, its special protected status meant that most of the substantial costs of repair was covered by city, prefectural, and national subsidies. Although internal alterations are permitted to buildings so designated, changes to the outside are not, so as to preserve the district's overall unity and appearance. Resembling Kyoto's *machiya*, Takayama's old merchant homes are built longer north-south, so they get the sun at least once a day, and have a narrow entrance but considerable depth. (For example, Hitoshi's home entrance measures 5.4 meters, while the depth of the house is 73 meters.) Several are open for public viewing.

Tourism in Takayama: from Insular to International

I was surprised to see how many of the tours to Japan advertised recently in the *New Zealand Herald* now include Takayama, which not so long ago was considered well off the beaten track. Being in a basin surrounded by towering mountains, the town was not easy to enter or leave, a factor that has strongly influenced both the psychology of its residents and local culture. That changed dramatically with the opening of the Takayama main railway line in 1934, followed by the Abo road tunnel in 1997 and the Hida Takayama line in 1998. Even before it became a fashionable travel destination, the railway had some importance, as it joined the Pacific Ocean and the Japan Sea. Nowadays Takayama is an easy bus ride from Tokyo, with several buses a day both ways, all year round.

Nevertheless, I have met residents who boast that they have never once left the city, and do not intend to. Hitoshi dubs this inherent parochial attitude



Photo 2: Hitoshi Morishita

Takayama is a place where many interesting old objects gradually come to light. We found this in our kura (storehouse), and hope to eventually discover what its purpose was.

"Takayama nationalism".

Domestic tourism took off in earnest in the 1980s, and internationally from around 2000. The town has now been put firmly on many package tour circuits, such as Tokyo-Kawaguchiko-Mt. Fuji-Takayama-Shirakawa-go-Kanazawa, enabling visitors to cover quite a bit of geographical and historical ground in a short time. Shirakawa-go and Gokayama, with their traditional thatched *gassho-tsukuri*-style farmhouses, are celebrated UNESCO World Heritage Sites, while Kanazawa is a historic city well worth exploring. Takayama is also not far from renowned tourist locations such as Nara and Kyoto, and convenient for travel to ski areas.

Tourism got a further major boost with Takayama's inclusion in both the Michelin Green Guide to Japan, as one of the country's 17 three-starred locations worth visiting, and the 2007 Michelin Japan Guidebook (Orange Book), as one of eight recommended places with three stars, the highest ranking. Other Michelin three-starred destinations include the conveniently close Shirakawa-go, Matsumoto, and Kanazawa. Suddenly, the small town of Takayama became known outside of Japan.

As mentioned earlier, the main claim to fame from ancient times is the town's famous twice-yearly festivals, characterized by huge, ornate floats (*yatai*), some with cleverly designed *karakuri* marionettes on top (Photo 3). According to relatives who attended, the spring festival held this year after an enforced break of four years, was a resounding success. The Sanno-matsuri or spring festival is held on April 14-15, centered on the Hie shrine and the south side of the old town, and featuring 12 *yatai*. The autumn festival or Hachiman-matsuri, on Oct. 9-10, focuses on Sakurayama Hachimangu and the north side of the city, with 11 floats. As well as the main procession, there are historical parades, lantern displays, and many other celebratory events. The innovative Takayama Matsuri Yatai Kaikan displays the 11 autumn floats, throughout the year, four at a time. The other festival floats are housed carefully in special buildings throughout the town, until it is their turn to be taken out and displayed, with groups of nearby residents having the responsibility for their care. *Takayama Matsuri* by Shigemi Yamamoto (1970, Asahi Shimbunsha), gives a fascinating and thoroughly detailed account of the history and significance of these festivals. Their spiritual aspect has faded over time, however,



Photo 3: Ken Sakai

A gorgeously decorated float at this year's Takayama spring festival, which thronged with local residents, and domestic and international visitors

and they are now mostly tourist attractions.

Other Local Attractions

Hida Takayama's two morning markets, famous in Japan, one alongside the Miya River and the other across town in front of the historic Jinya site, are another strong drawcard for tourists and locals alike. The latter originated in the Edo Period with silk-raising farmers selling mulberry leaves; even now, only farmers can have stalls here. According to A., a friend who has taken part in the Miya River market for many years, rice, *mochi*, fruit, vegetables, flowers, and local crafts have always been sold there; traditional medicines, old coins, and sewing items used to be but no longer are; and newly on the scene are coffee, croissants, sweets, and grapes. A. says that on some days her customers are 80%-90% foreigners. She feels that, in future, it will be essential for the vendors to develop better communication skills, including with the many tour guides, to alleviate any potential problems.

There are numerous hot springs in the region, many other festivals including the dramatic annual *tezutsu* hand-held fireworks display, and historic temples such as Kokubunji (established by Emperor Shomu in 746), Takayama's oldest structure, with its splendid 1,200-year-old ginkgo tree (Photo 4). The Museum of History and Art (Hida Takayama Machi no Hakubutsukan) tells the story of Takayama's founding and development, with exhibits on regional art and literature. There are several other museums, such as the retro Showa Museum around the corner from us, and an attractive, well-equipped library. Takayama city was selected as one of the 88 sacred anime pilgrimage sites in Japan by the Anime Tourism Association in 2018, because the TV anime series *Hyouka* was partly filmed there.

Master Artisans

Under the ancient *so-you-chou* tax system of the Asuka (595-710) and Nara (710-794) periods whereby taxes were levied as rice (*so*), local commodities (*chou*), or either labor or cloth (*you*), the Hida region paid its dues by providing carpenters to the central government. These *Hida no takumi* or master artisans included *miya-daiku* (shrine carpenters) who became highly respected for their advanced woodworking skills, and were sent to help construct many of the famous large shrines and temples in Japan's first capital, Nara, in the eighth century. Some 40,000-50,000 carpenters and artisans were dispatched over 600 years. Their techniques have been passed down through the

Photo 4: Hitoshi Morishita



Hida Kokubunji temple with its glorious ginkgo tree

centuries. The Gifu-kenritsu Mokko Geijutsu Gakko (Gifu Prefectural Woodcraft Skills School) in Takayama, one of the few such institutions in Japan, receives numerous applicants for the limited number of places available each year. The city is famous for its furniture and other woodcraft (boosted by the region's top-grade timber), especially *ichii-itto-bori* carvings made from a single piece of yew wood. There are also several impressive sculptures and icons in temples and museums throughout the area that were hewn by Enku (1632-1695), the renowned Buddhist monk, poet and carver from nearby Mino. The region's lacquerware (*Hida Shunkei*) and textiles (*Hida-zome*) are other representative examples of beautiful, intricate local crafts.

Akiba-sama: Protector from Fire

Like other Japanese towns, Takayama has a long history of grappling with fires, having experienced many large-scale conflagrations. Interestingly, in none of these did any shrines dedicated to Akiba-sama, the god for safety in the home and protection from fire, perish. There are at least 60 of these small Akiba-sama shrines dotted around Takayama; most are lit up every night by conscientious nearby residents. Although shrines in honor of Akiba-sama also exist elsewhere, their ubiquity in Takayama gives the town a special flavor. (Akihabara, Tokyo's famed electronic goods district, got its name from an Akiba-sama shrine built there after the area was destroyed by fire in 1869.) Many homes in Takayama have a small votary tablet in the kitchen for protection from fires. Some examples of the elaborate costumes and banners worn by fire-fighters in the Edo Period can be seen in the Museum of History and Art. With this history, the "*hi no youjin*" ("beware of fire") cry heard nightly through the cold season somehow feels particularly poignant in Takayama.

Cuisine

In Hida Takayama, where it was too cold to grow rice, a wide range of things have traditionally been eaten, such as *koro-imo*, tiny potatoes that might usually be discarded, cooked with oil and soy sauce. Because of its location between the two regions, Hida's cuisine has been influenced by both Kanto and Kansai. *Hoba miso*, vegetables grilled on a large *hoba* (magnolia) leaf, now a prominent restaurant dish, used to be an everyday family food. This *yaki-miso* is still one of Hitoshi's favorite choices for breakfast. Locals like to grill all kinds of foods, including *tsukemono* (pickles). Takayama is famous for its *Hida-gyu* or local beef, including *gyu-sushi* (beef sushi). A recent new trend is cat cafes, where you can either take your own cat or pet the ones resident there. The area's sake is top-notch, with the seven local breweries offering free tours throughout the winter, and sometimes free tastings as well. It is said that in the mid-Edo Period, Takayama had as many as 56 breweries (Photo 5).

The Future of Tourism in Takayama

One of the "three arrows" of Abenomics – increased tourism or *kanko rikkoku* – was laid out in the March 2013 governmental Action

Photo 5: Hitoshi Morishita



Old homes in a Takayama street. Note the sokko gutter at the right side of the street and the sugidama cedar ball under the eaves, indicating a sake brewery.

Plan, following on from the Visit Japan campaign begun in April 2003. When the second administration of late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe established its tourism “vision” in 2015, there were 19.74 million annual foreign visitors to Japan (compared to 8.6 million in 2010). In 2019, pre-Covid, this number had increased to 31.88 million and the government set a goal for 2020 of 40 million. However, as a result of the strict pandemic-related measures, from January to July, 2020, the actual number of foreign visitors to Japan was only 395,000. Meanwhile, in 2020, Takayama had 473,000 domestic

visitors, and 120,000 from overseas.

The number of foreign residents of Japan was 2.93 million at the end of 2019. There were slight drops thereafter, but in June 2022 it reached a record 2.96 million. Even in peak economic times, the bulk of tourism has always been domestic. However, as pointed out by Toshihiro Menju, managing director of the Japan Centre for International Exchange (JCIE) in the May/June, 2023 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, many of Japan’s foreign residents are impoverished, unemployed, or unable to return to their home countries, so the increase in their number does not necessarily translate into greater inbound tourism by non-Japanese.

Takayama has been steadily capitalizing on its many attractions to bring in more tourists, including from overseas. For example, visitors can view demonstrations and take classes in a wide range of local crafts at the Traditional Culture and Arts Square, and there are also more English-language materials available than previously. However, the state of English on signage around the town is still often quite poor, something that I hope will soon be improved, perhaps through participation in the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) signage project. Moreover, there is often no non-Japanese-language explanation at all in places where there should be. Vendors at the morning markets and shop staff in the most popular areas have become much more accustomed to international visitors in recent years, and most can manage a basic conversation with a potential customer in several languages.

According to an article in the Dec. 12, 2022 issue of *Chunich Shimibun*, in 2019 the annual tourist-related expenditure in Takayama was about 100 billion yen. There has been a rush in construction of large hotels, with the number of hotel rooms in the city expected to reach 5,000 by 2025, about double that of 2017 – making it the third-biggest accommodation provider in the Chubu region, after Nagoya and Kanazawa. Some residents complain that this is too much, and that Takayama is losing its unique character as a result. There may not be enough employees or restaurants and shops to provide so many

potential tourists with a proper *motenashi* (Japanese-style hospitality) experience. As cogently advised by the eloquent writer, researcher, and art collector Alex Kerr, it may be preferable to better manage the flow of incoming tourists (such as through lottery systems), rather than simply reducing their number. One of Kerr’s suggestions is to build carparks not right beside an attraction but a short distance away, thereby enabling visitors to enjoy the approach to the site and more fully savor the experience.

Onerous entry requirements left many foreigners, even those with permanent resident or spouse status, unable to enter or return to Japan for many months, while some were stuck there, unable to return to their home countries. Although risk-averse Japan never had legal mandates regarding face-masks, their ubiquitous use, including in outdoor settings, felt burdensome to many non-Japanese. Official government advice on mask-wearing was finally eased in May 2023, when Japan fully re-opened, but many Japanese still use them – though now, thankfully, there is much less pressure on foreigners who choose not to. In a recent survey, deeply conservative Gifu Prefecture had Japan’s second-highest ratio of people who continue to wear masks, at 70.1%. During the pandemic, tourism in Takayama plummeted dramatically, but recently there has been a huge surge in both domestic and international tourists.

I was disturbed by the pandemic-induced “new etiquette for staying at *onsen*” that was displayed at many hot springs we visited in February. It advised visitors to talk as little as possible, enjoy themselves but not too much, and avoid unnecessary contact with others. While some may prefer the resulting solitude, others find this type of coercive advice highly off-putting (especially since it is not based on any scientific logic). I hope it has now been dropped. However, the new style of consumerism that is steadily advancing round the globe, digital-based and with minimal human contact, will surely stay – again, this may well appeal to some travelers, but not to all.

One challenge for Takayama is how to maintain its traditional atmosphere, the heart of its appeal, while improving convenience and accessibility. This has gradually been happening, with many old homes in our area being converted into trendy restaurants, cafes, or community centers. Some innovations, like the roasted sweet potatoes (*yaki-imo*) on sale in automatic vending machines, seem a step backwards. There is steadily increasing specialization, such as the pop-up shop I saw last summer that sold only watermelon smoothies.

New travel possibilities include a greater emphasis on eco-friendly tourism; activity-focused longer stays where tourists help farmers or fruit growers with daily tasks, in return for food and accommodation; and more specialized programs, such as temple stays with instruction in languages other than Japanese, providing a deeper Buddhist experience for spiritual seekers. I hope that more visitors to Takayama will feel a sense of adventure in this unique environment – an Andorra-like peaceful island amongst the soaring, magnificent mountains. **JS**

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