

Land of Rice, Japan

Initially, rice making started in Asia and it came to Japan approximately 2000 to 3000 years ago. Rice can be preserved for a long time and everyone started to cultivate it. The climate conditions in Japan was suitable for rice making. Back in the days, there was a town that had made rice a profound product of Akita, which is situated in north-eastern area of Japan. That town was “Kakumagawa”. Many farmers had made rice to live and also had used the boat transportation to send it all around the country and achieved massive amounts of wealth.

Let's have a look at a farmer's yearly routine.

(Directly translated 直訳)

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Let's have a look at a farmer's yearly routine.

Spring (March ~ May)

To make good quality products, they have to fertilise and keep the soil soft. They make the soil soft by cultivating the land and scattering the fertilisers to supply the nutrients. These are important basic steps of farming.

Summer (June ~ August)

When the soil is prepared and ready, the seedlings will be planted. When the seedlings are finished planting, it is from here that it becomes crucial. During summer, the crops get damaged by pests. Therefore, they use pesticides to keep the crops safe and to keep them in good conditions. Other than the pests, weeds need to be removed since it interrupts the growth of the crops.

Autumn (September ~ November)

This season is the time of harvest and also the busiest time for the farmers. Harvesting is the biggest event in farming and the time to decide whether the crops are good or not for this year. All the processes such as drying, threshing and shipping of the rice

are done. If the farm is managed by a family, they share their work together.

Winter (December~February)

During winter, rice cannot be cultivated. The maximum snow that settles is about 150cm high and covers the farm until end of March sometimes. The snow created by the cold wind from the north, allows the soil to rest and becomes a source to make tasty rice.

Rice and Kakumagawa – an ideal location –

At that time, Kakumagawa region had been producing a lot of rice. However, mass production of it did not make the region prosper more than any other region. This region had flourished mostly because of their location. Kakumagawa is located at the confluence of Omono River and Yokote River, thus, they were gifted with water transportation. Therefore, a good deal of rice was carried out by boat from Kakumagawa's port to Osaka where numerous business deals were made. Akita prefecture's source of revenue was by selling 50% of the rice that they had produced. By mid-19 Century, Kakumagawa became the wealthiest town in Akita prefecture with many merchant landowners.

The Merchants and Kakumagawa – Merchant and Hongo family –

Kakumagawa's prosperity was represented by the Hongo, a wealthy merchant. Hongo family was a merchant family and they were successful when they had changed their job to ship related business from the late Edo period. When they made a fortune, they used it as their capital to buy farming fields. Eventually they had become one of the wealthiest families in that region. In September 1881, Meiji Emperor had a tour in Tohoku-Hokkaido. He had chosen Kakumagawa region as his accommodation although it was located a little far from the National Highway. This occasion had proven the potential and the capability that this region had at that time. Hongo family provided the 'Anzaisho', a temporary palace, for the emperor. That building was demolished straight away but a square shaped stone 'Omashidokoro' meaning Emperor's living room is placed to show that the emperor was surely here.

Many of Hongo's buildings are decaying. However, they are valued as a cultural property because there are plenty of fine designs and many expensive materials were used, such as Keyaki and Kurogaki. Kakumagawa was a resting spot on the Omono river for water transportation. Numerous houses made a fortune back then. The Hongo

residence was one of them and it shows the prosperity of Kakaumagawa.

Later the Oou railroad line was opened to traffic in 1905 and the ship transportation had become obsolete, causing the town to decline. Hongo family were able to sustain their financial power until Second World War began due to their ownership of an extensive amount of tenant-farms. After Second World War, there was an agricultural reform that the tenant-farms were no longer useful and that they had lost their source of income. By nature, when you have a big property, the owner would have had to be wealthy in order to maintain it but that was no longer possible after the war. They had to go through many hardships to maintain it for a long time. Especially during winter.

There was a possibility of demolishing the building but many people considered it as a valuable cultural property and hoped for preservation. Therefore it is still kept where it is. Fortunately, the third room in the eastern side of the Omoya, the main building, was perfect for tea ceremony and it is used daily for tea ceremony teaching.

Hanabi and Kakumagawa –last year’s rich harvest celebration and this year’s wish– Fireworks are the summer’s seasonal event in Japan and its scale and history may be different. Every year, there is an event called “Japan’s Top Three Firework Show”. The top three fireworks take place in Ibaraki, Niigata and Akita. “Tsuchiura All Japan Fireworks Competition” is held during October in Ibaraki prefecture belonging to the Kanto area; “Nagaoka Festival Fireworks” is held in August in Nigata, a well-known prefecture of heavy snowfall area; and “*Omagari National Fireworks Competition*” is held on the last Saturday of August in Akita prefecture in Omagari where Kakumagawa belongs to.

Unfortunately, there are no historical records of Omagari’s firework up until mid-19th century but it has a long history since the Edo period. Omagari’s firework was introduced in a document for the first time at the beginning of 1800. It was when a traveller, Masumi Sugae, had drawn an illustration of it in her diary, ‘Tsuki no Idewaji’. But the first firework that has been recorded historically in Japan was when Date Masamune had watched it in 1589. There is also a record that in 1613, John Saris, a British man, made an occasion for the Chinese companion to show the firework to Tokugawa Ieyasu.

In relation to Kakumagawa, when the area had become prosperous due to the boat

transportation, the rich merchants had built houses and restaurants nearby the port. With that, they had welcomed the traders. In 1910, the first *Omagari National Fireworks Competition* was held as “*1st Competitive Exhibition of Oou’s Six Prefectures’ Fireworks*” to celebrate the local shrines.

Later, although the firework was suspended because of the war, it restarted in 1946. Planning a firework event straight after the end of the war shows how much the people from this region love it.

1) Firework simulation

Overview: Your one and only firework

This opportunity is one of the rare experiences that you can do in Japan; making your own firework. The professional firework craftsman will give you instructions on how to make a firework and they will explain its history and what kind of fireworks there are. In this experience, you can make a firework but a ‘fake firework’; it is a firework that does not include any gunpowder to explode. You may visit the factory that creates the real fireworks before or after the firework making experience. The firework’s craftsman will give a tour in the order of how it is made. By the time the tour ends, how you think towards fireworks would have changed and you may find them more attractive.

2) Tea ceremony experience

Overview: Tea ceremony in an old house which represents the region

You can savour maccha in one of the rooms of an old private house. To enjoy the tea ceremony, Japanese sweets will be provided. Being in the traditional room, feeling the atmosphere and tasting the nice tea are what we would like you to experience. When the ceremony finishes, you shall be more curious and have an urge of wanting to know more about the traditional tea ceremony.

3) Hanabi-maki Sushi Making Experience

Overview: Creating the colour of Hanabi with Sushi (recreation of Hanabi with Sushi)
‘Omagari’s Fireworks’ has more than 100years of history. Thus, it was just an idea that had come up to make a sushi that resembles the colourful fireworks. The colourful sushi uses Akita’s rice and it is guaranteed that you and your friends will love it!

- Experience 1 - Making Imitate Fireworks. (4th November 2015 Feliciazoe)
- Experience 2 - Tea ceremony experience (4th November 2015 Feliciazoe)

- □ Experience 3 – Hanabi-maki Sushi making experience (23rd December 2015 Jasmine)