

Toyama Prefecture Observational Report

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Introduction

This month, I was given the opportunity by JASO to visit Toyama Prefecture after participating in the 30th annual Toyama Cup. This observational trip was full of many firsts for me; my first visit to Japan, my first time traveling overseas, and my first journey alone. On the day of departure, I headed to the airport carrying a mix of nervousness and anticipation. I was unsure if I would make it to my destination without any issues. Some initial flight delays caused me to miss my connection from Tokyo to Toyama, but thankfully, I managed to make it safely to Toyama Prefecture.

The flight's arrival time was late at night. As I looked out of the airplane window at Toyama's unfamiliar night landscape, it finally dawned on me that my journey had begun. Although those three nights and five days passed by in a flash, visiting Toyama Prefecture was an invaluable experience. In this report, I will highlight the three most memorable aspects of my observational trip in Toyama Prefecture.

Toyama's Nature

The first thing that stuck out to me was Toyama's vast, natural scenery. Visiting Toyama was my first time seeing such flat rice fields and tall mountains. On the second day of the trip, I had the opportunity to visit Tateyama mountain range and Kurobe Dam on an eight-hour trip along the Tateyama-Kurobe Alpine route. We took the Tateyama cable car in Bijodaira and a series of other buses until we arrived at our destination. Bus rides were accompanied by bilingual guide videos explaining the local ecology and history of Tateyama mountain range. The scenic view of the mountain landscape from the valley was breathtaking.

Upon arrival, I was surprised by the sheer scale of the mountain range. It was nothing like I had ever seen before. Standing on the observation deck, the green and white landscape seemed to stretch on infinitely. Even though the weather forecast had predicted rain, it was luckily a sunny day, and we could clearly see the surrounding mountain peaks. From there, we strolled along the cobblestone pathway next to Kurobe Dam. The roaring water rushing through the dam and glittering surface of the lake was mesmerizing, and the neighboring train had many great souvenir shops. Travelling the Tateyama-Kurobe Alpine route is an absolute must for anyone visiting Toyama Prefecture. That day, we had extra time on our schedule, so we decided to also take the path to Shomyo Falls, the tallest waterfall in Japan. The trek uphill was steep, but reaching the waterfall's observational deck felt very triumphant. On a hot and humid summer afternoon, the cool mist splashing off the waterfall almost felt like rain. Though Oregon and Toyama have distinct geography, Shomyo Falls reminded me of Oregon's Multnomah Falls, which I also had the opportunity to visit this year.

On the third day, we travelled deep into the mountains to visit Gokayama's historic Ainokura Gassho-style village, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995. The roughly 300-year-old houses, the oldest of which date back to the Edo period, are still lived in today. While strolling through the village, I wondered if the people who lived in this settlement hundreds of years ago must have been viewing the same landscape I was looking at now.

We also visited the village's museum. Inside that 3-story building, I saw shelves which were once used to cultivate silkworms. There were also exhibits showing the process of Washi paper-making. Climbing up into the roof of the house, I could clearly see the characteristic pillars which gave these roofs their signature shape. I was astonished to learn that the wooden beams were secured entirely using only hand-woven straw rope, without the use of a single metal nail. It was a wonderful experience seeing firsthand how these sturdy buildings, preserved from the past, coexist with the residents of Gokayama today.

Toyama's Local Specialties

The second thing that was most memorable to me was Toyama's unique regional specialties. Toyama is famous for fresh seafood and local delicacies, like Japanese glass shrimp and black ramen, but what left the strongest impression on me was the firefly squid. On the fourth day of my trip, I visited the Hotaruika Museum, where I was able to learn about the life cycle of these squids and the mystery behind why they emit a fantastical, star-like glow.

According to our guide, firefly squids make the journey to Toyama Bay every spring in order to spawn. It is unclear why these squids are bioluminescent, but researchers theorize that firefly squids emit blue light to camouflage into the sunlight and disguise themselves from deep-sea predators. I also was impressed by the hard work that Toyama's fishermen put in every year to catch firefly squid. Unlike other regions in Japan, Toyama's fishermen use fixed-net fishing methods to minimize damage to the squid they catch, which is said to be the reason why the squids harvested in Toyama Prefecture are especially delicious. After my visit to the museum, I had a newfound appreciation for the seafood served at local restaurants. Unfortunately, live firefly squid displays are limited to the spring season, so I was unable to see them during my trip. However, I hope to return to Toyama Prefecture someday to witness their glow in person.

I was also fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to experience Toyama's traditional crafts. On the final day of my trip, I participated in a workshop making Kumiko, a traditional Japanese woodworking technique where small pieces of wood are carefully assembled without nails to create geometric patterns. The process of assembling the pieces was far more difficult than I had anticipated. The pieces of wood were very fragile and prone to breaking, which made me realize that a high degree of precision and attention to detail is required from artisans to assemble Kumiko panels. There were many patterns on display in the craft lounge, from delicate snowflake designs to a massive, impressive mural of the Tateyama Mountain Range.

Toyama's Locals

Finally, the most memorable part of my trip was the kindness of the people I met. More than the places I visited, the warmth and hospitality Toyama's locals showed me left the deepest impression. While there are kind people in Oregon, I think it is rare for people to go out of their way to help others in the same way that I experienced in Toyama. Whether it was someone letting me board an elevator first, staff quietly opening doors and carrying my bag, or hosts who always welcomed me with a smile and patiently explained to me things I was unfamiliar with, the people around me were consistently anticipating what I was thinking and going out of their way to help me.

In those hundreds of small, everyday actions, which easily go unnoticed, I could feel everyone's kindness. Initially, I felt guilty receiving such generous care, but once I understood this as being a core aspect of Japanese hospitality, it left a deep impression in my heart. I believe this was the most important lesson I learned during my trip. The generosity and enthusiasm of Toyama's locals made me deeply feel the connection between Toyama Prefecture and Oregon State. Since returning home, I have been thinking about how I want to cherish the people around me in the same way.

Conclusions

Thanks to the gracious support and guidance of Toyama prefecture's staff and CIRS, my five days in Toyama were deeply fulfilling. I was honored to present my speech to the Bureau Directors of the Toyama Prefectural Office and to meet many of the talented CIRS working in Toyama to promote international exchange between Japan and their home countries. Their stories were very inspiring and have given me newfound motivation to continue my Japanese language studies. Like the CIRs I met, I plan to take the Japanese Language Proficiency test and hope to live and work in Japan someday. I want to sincerely thank everyone who made this trip possible, as well as the local businesses and organizations that allowed us to observe their activities. I hope that more people can discover the beauty and charm of Toyama Prefecture. Thank you!