

## A slice of fun in Tanabe, Wakayama

A visit to the Wakayama Prefecture city of Tanabe, the Kinki district's biggest city by area, wouldn't be complete without a trip to the ancient Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trails that gained UNESCO World Heritage status in 2004. But a tour of the city reveals many more attractions, from hot spring havens to activities as unique as chainsaw art.

Ryujinmura, a district that merged into Tanabe in October last year, is home to Keiji Kidokoro, who has carved out a name for himself as one of the world's top chainsaw artists, winning world competitions including this year's World Chainsaw Art Competition in Japan.

Chainsaw art is a type of sculpting using chainsaws. It is among several art forms performed by artists living in Ryujinmura's nine ateliers that were set up under a program to revive the district, and visitors can see the art in action or even pay to join a class.

To demonstrate his skills, Kidokoro rolls out a 100 kg log of Japanese cedar and fires up his biggest chainsaw. To a background of rock music, he drives the chainsaw into the log, sending a stream of wood chips into the air. In just a few minutes he has carved out the outline of what will become a bear's head. Gradually using smaller chainsaws, he works on the details and in under an hour the work of art, a life-sized bear's head, is finished. At the end of the performance he is covered in sweat.



**Keiji Kidokoro drives his chainsaw into a log behind a screen of protective netting**

"You're holding these chainsaws the whole time, swinging them around, so you use a huge amount of physical energy," he says.

Kidokoro has been carving with chainsaws for the last six years. He first saw chainsaw artists in Shizuoka 10 years ago, and thought he could give the art a shot himself. Now he can sculpt works fetching a price tag of between 60,000 and 70,000 yen -- not bad when the logs of cedar can be bought for just a few thousand yen each.

Works he has carved include birds, human figures, pet dogs and a photograph he pulled out even showed a



**Mist covers layers of mountains in a view from the Kumano Kodo in Wakayama Prefecture.**

**during a demonstration in Tanabe's Ryujinmura district.**

chainsaw carved out of wood.

"I often get asked to do pet dogs that have died," he says. "People send me a photo of their pet dog that has died and I carve that."

Kidokoro has participated in speed carving competitions, and says speed is an important part of his work, which sometimes involves carving out four sculptures a day.

"But of course taking your time to carve out something the way you want to isn't bad," he adds. "It comes down to the limits of the carver's particular pastime."

Kidokoro is not the only artist in Ryujinmura who makes good use of the plentiful cedar. Nearby is the outlet G. Works, which produces and sells original handmade furniture and craft works.

Creations such as wooden armchairs, rocking chairs, benches, tables and children's furniture produced by artist Izumi Matsumoto can be bought at the outlet, which is filled with the fresh smell of wood. Also on sale is Japanese paper produced by Kayo Okuno, who works there with her husband.

Mountain forests cover 95 percent of the land area in Ryujinmura, so it's not surprising that local residents make good use of them. In fact, a large amount of the Kii Peninsula, where Wakayama Prefecture is located, is covered in rich forests on the Kii Mountain Range, whose peaks, trees, waterfalls and other natural objects have been held sacred since ancient times. The Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trails, which lead through this nature, linking three sacred Buddhist and Shinto sites -- Yoshino and Omine, Kumano Sanzan and Koyasan -- are part of the "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range" that were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2004.



There are many places to start a walk along the Kumano Kodo, but one popular spot is Hosshinmon Oji, considered to be the entrance of the path to the Kumano Hongu Taisha grand shrine.

Walking through the forest with soft light filtering through the cypress and cedar trees is peaceful. Most of the time the only sound that can be heard is the occasional chirping of birds. An exception in some places is the explosive



**Kidokoro takes a look over a recently finished creation in Ryujinmura.**

**A sign directs travelers along a Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route in Wakayama Prefecture.**

charges that echo through the woods to scare away wild boars and other animals found in the area.

There are also some fantastic scenery spots along the way to Kumano Hongu Taisha. At Fushi Ogami Oji, visitors can look out toward the hazy layers of mountains in the distance and see the spot where the old Kumano Hongu Taisha shrine used to be located.

The shrine was originally built on a sandbar of intersecting rivers, but it was moved to a separate location about 1 kilometer away after being washed out in floods at the end of the 19th century. The shrine is a popular place for visitors to offer prayers.

Isao Sakamoto, a 78-year-old guide who knows the mountains well, said the natural scenery of the Kumano Kodo appeals to him the most.



**Kumano Hongu Taisha grand shrine.**

"The scenery is different every day. And it changes with the seasons. Walking in these mountains feels so good," he says.

Sakamoto is a member of the Kumano Hongu Kataribe no Kai guide service. Altogether there are 39 guides, who offer their services at a price of 10,000 yen for up to four hours, and 20,000 yen for a longer six-hour route.



**Rich riverside scenery surrounds an outdoor spa at the traditional Kamigoten inn in Tanabe.**

After a long walk on the Kumano Kodo, dipping in a hot spring is a perfect way to relax. Tanabe's Ryujin Onsen hot spring has a history going back more than 1,000 years, and is known as one of Japan's three "beautifying hot springs," along with Yunokawa hot spring in Shimane Prefecture and Kawanaka hot spring in Gunma Prefecture. The water is rich in radium, and is said to be good for healing nerve pain. It also said to produce beautiful skin, and your skin does feel smooth after emerging from the water.

The cozy Kamigoten inn is one place where visitors can take a dip in this popular hot spring. The rooms have traditional tatami-mat flooring, and futons for bedding. Hundreds of years ago, the inn was used as a resort for Tokugawa Yorinobu (1602-1671), the 10th son of the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) and founder of the Kii branch of the Tokugawa family. The inn's Onari no Ma room features a raised floor typical of rooms for honored guests and has beautiful calligraphy on the walls and sliding screen doors. An overnight stay at the inn, including two meals, costs between 16,000 and

19,000 yen.

Traditional full-course dinners are served at the inn, with items on the menu including amago salmon, venison, tofu, tempura and a range of vegetables, along with fruit for dessert.

Visitors to Tanabe interested in finding out about some of the city's historical figures may want to visit the Minakata Kumagusu Archives in Tanabe's Nakayashikimachi district. The archives pay tribute to the scholar Minagata Kumagusu, who spent time in Tanabe researching slime molds.



**A selection of the treats available during mealtime at the Kamigoten inn in Tanabe.**

Another famous figure, born in Tanabe, is Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art of aikido. A beachside statue commemorating Ueshiba was set up in 1988 in Ogihama Park, and Tanabe tourism officials are in the process of starting an aikido workshop for visitors.



**Aikido participants demonstrate a flip at an aikido hall in Tanabe. A black-and-white picture of aikido founder Morihei Ueshiba is seen in the background.**

Members of a local dojo demonstrated the martial art in a recent demonstration, flipping each other with seeming ease. In just a few seconds they were able to pin their opponents down, twisting and bending their limbs back into uncomfortable positions.

The Aikido Tanabe Dojo is offering one-hour classes to groups of between five and 20 people for 1,000 yen per person, although bookings are needed two weeks in advance.

Other attractions in Tanabe include fishing, frequent festivals, and a range of historical and cultural hot spots, along with plenty of places to sample the beautiful natural scenery -- perfect for those searching for respite from busy city life. (Story and photos by Aaron Baldwin)

Getting there:

Wakayama Prefecture and the city of Tanabe are easily accessible from Kansai International Airport and Nanki-Shirahama Airport, and the flight from Haneda Airport takes only about an hour. For further information, visit the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau Web site at <http://www.tb-kumano.jp/>

The city is putting efforts into attracting foreign visitors, and will have an English

Web site up and running in the near future.

October 26, 2006

---

Copyright 2004-2005 THE MAINICHI NEWSPAPERS. All rights reserved.

Under the copyright law of Japan, use of all materials on this website, except for personal and noncommercial purposes, is prohibited without the express written permission of the Mainichi Newspapers Co. The copyright of the materials belongs to the Mainichi Newspapers Co. unless stated otherwise.

(C) 2005 Microsoft