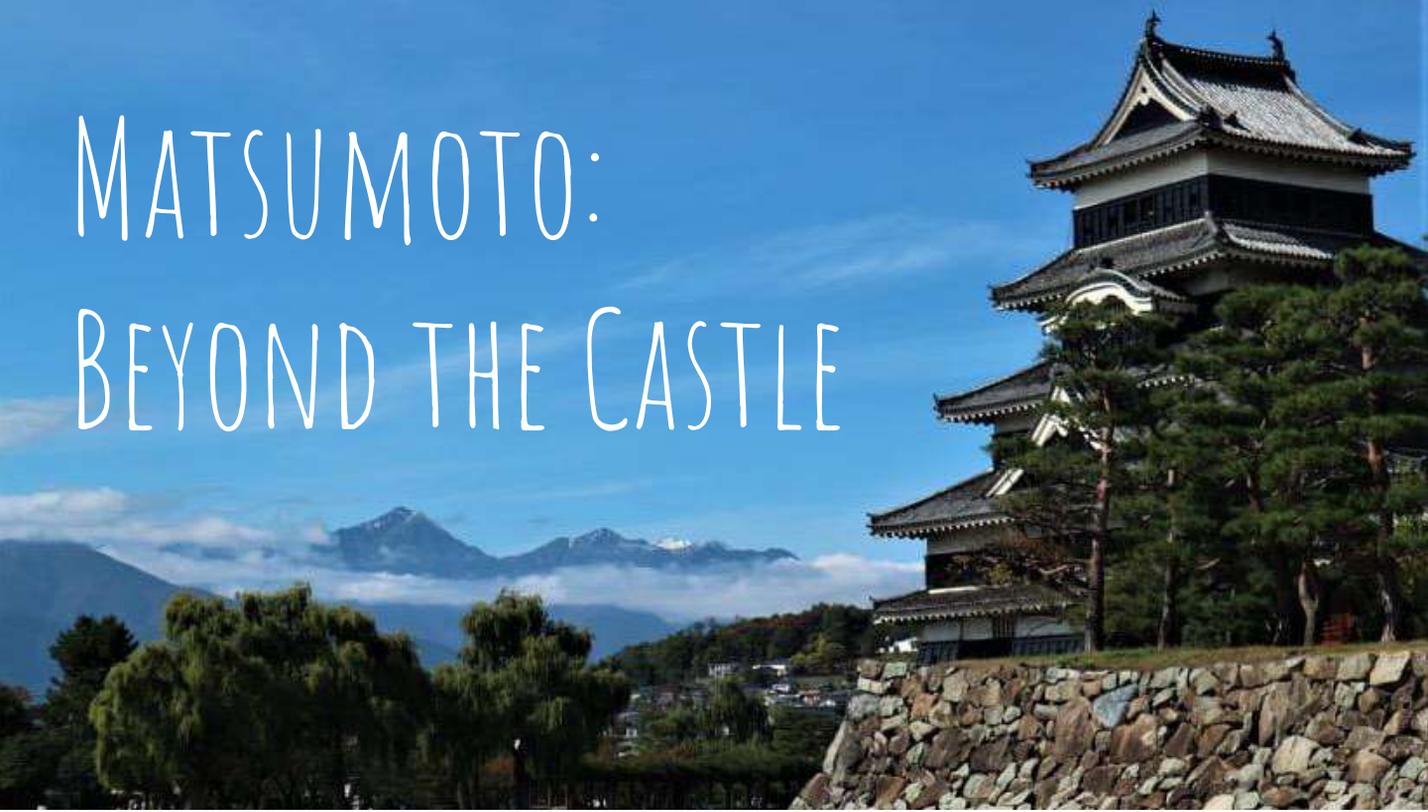


# MATSUMOTO: BEYOND THE CASTLE



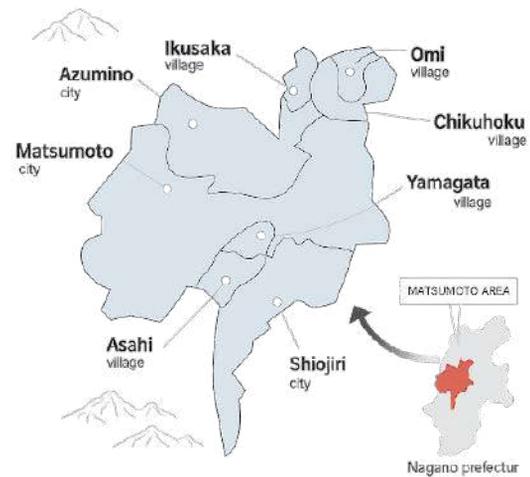
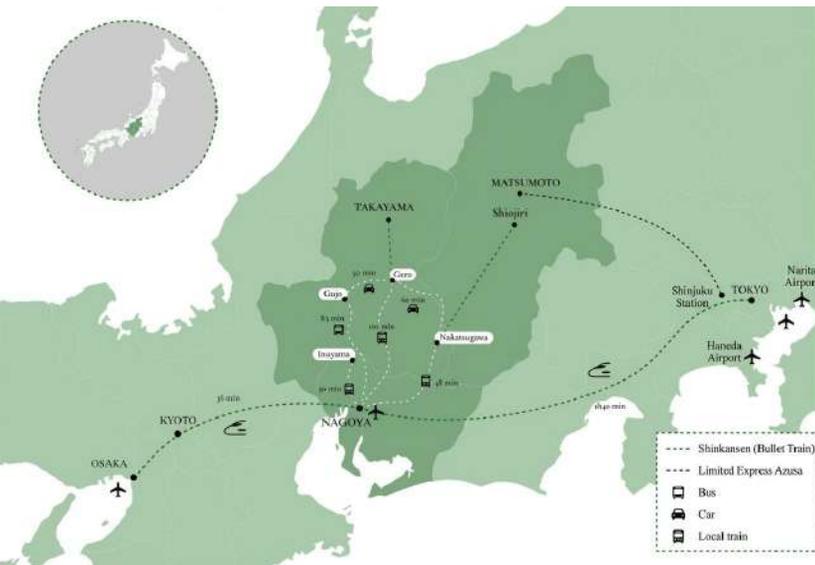
A Curated Guide to Travel  
in the Matsumoto Region

# CONTENTS

- 3 Location & Access
- 4 Area USPs
- 5 Key Locations
- 7 Matsumoto Cycling
- 8 Matsumoto Walking
- 9 Kiso Hirasawa
- 10 Wine Tasting
- 11 Zenkoji Highway
- 12 Area Highlights
- 14 Key Accommodation
- 16 Itineraries



# Gateway to the Alps



## Why Visit Matsumoto

Matsumoto is a welcoming gateway to the Northern Japanese Alps, where clear mountain air, wide open landscapes, and long-standing traditions come together.

From emerald-green wasabi farms and lacquerware workshops to quiet alpine trails, the region reveals a side of Japan shaped by nature, craftsmanship, and a slower, more thoughtful pace of travel.

## Matsumoto Connections

- Tokyo □ 2.5 hours (2 trains)
- Nagano city □ 50 mins
- Narai □ 49 minutes
- Kiso-Hirasawa □ 35 mins
- Kamikochi □ 1 hour
- Nagoya □ 2 hours

Just a few hours from Tokyo, Matsumoto offers effortless access to the region's most atmospheric mountain and heritage destinations. The spring-fed castle town lies less than 40 minutes by train from Narai-juku on the Nakasendō, and is also the closest urban base for reaching Kamikōchi.

It is an ideal base for travellers seeking smooth logistics and immediate immersion into rural Japan's landscapes, craft traditions, and quiet mountain valleys.

# What Makes Matsumoto Special

## 1. Craft & Mountain Heritage

### *A Region Shaped by Makers*

Matsumoto sits at the meeting point of mountain culture and living craft traditions. Lacquerware towns, spring-water agriculture, and centuries-old post towns form an unbroken thread of artisanship that is still woven into everyday life. Travellers encounter a region where makers are not performers but neighbours.

## 2. Water, Landscape & Everyday Culture

### *Life Nourished by Clear Mountain Springs*

Snowmelt-fed springs shape the region's fields, villages, and castle-town streets. This clarity of water gives rise to wasabi farms, rice paddies, orchards, and a rural lifestyle tied closely to the rhythms of the land. It is a place where nature and community blend seamlessly.

## 3. Gateway to Gentle Alpine Exploration

### *Alpine Access Without the Complexity*

Matsumoto is the closest cultural base to Kamikōchi and the valleys of the Chūbu-Sangaku National Park. Soft adventure comes naturally here—scenic cycling routes, riverside walks, and satoyama landscapes that invite guests into the mountains

without requiring technical skill and allows them to move through farmland, forest, and village landscapes at an unhurried pace. An authentic form of outdoor travel that pairs well with culture and craft.

## 4. Heritage Routes & Story-Based Travel

### *Journeys That Follow Centuries-Old Footsteps*

The region provides direct access to Narai-juku and the pilgrimage paths of the Zenkoji Kaidō. These routes reveal a quieter Japan shaped by faith, commerce, and rural settlements that retain their original character. For culturally minded travellers, the journey itself becomes part of the experience.

## 5. Historic Castle Town with Artistic Depth

### *Culture in a Livable, Creative City*

Centered around a National Treasure castle, Matsumoto is a walkable, low-rise city with a relaxed, artistic atmosphere. Galleries, cafés, and small ateliers give the town a creative energy that never feels curated for tourism. It's an easy, inviting place to slow down.



# Key Locations

Matsumoto includes the city and its surrounding valleys, post towns, and alpine foothills. From castle-town streets to wasabi farms, lacquerware villages, and quiet pilgrimage routes, the region offers much in the way of rural culture, nature, and living tradition.



## Matsumoto City

Matsumoto is a castle town shaped by clear spring water, walkable streets, and a relaxed creative energy. Its unique black-lacquered keep looks out over a city of small ateliers, cafés, and everyday culture.

## Kiso Hirasawa

Kiso-Hirasawa is a Nakasendō post town known for its long-standing lacquerware tradition, with family-run ateliers lining the old route. Visitors can meet artisans, see their urushi work up close, and experience a community where craft is still part of everyday life.



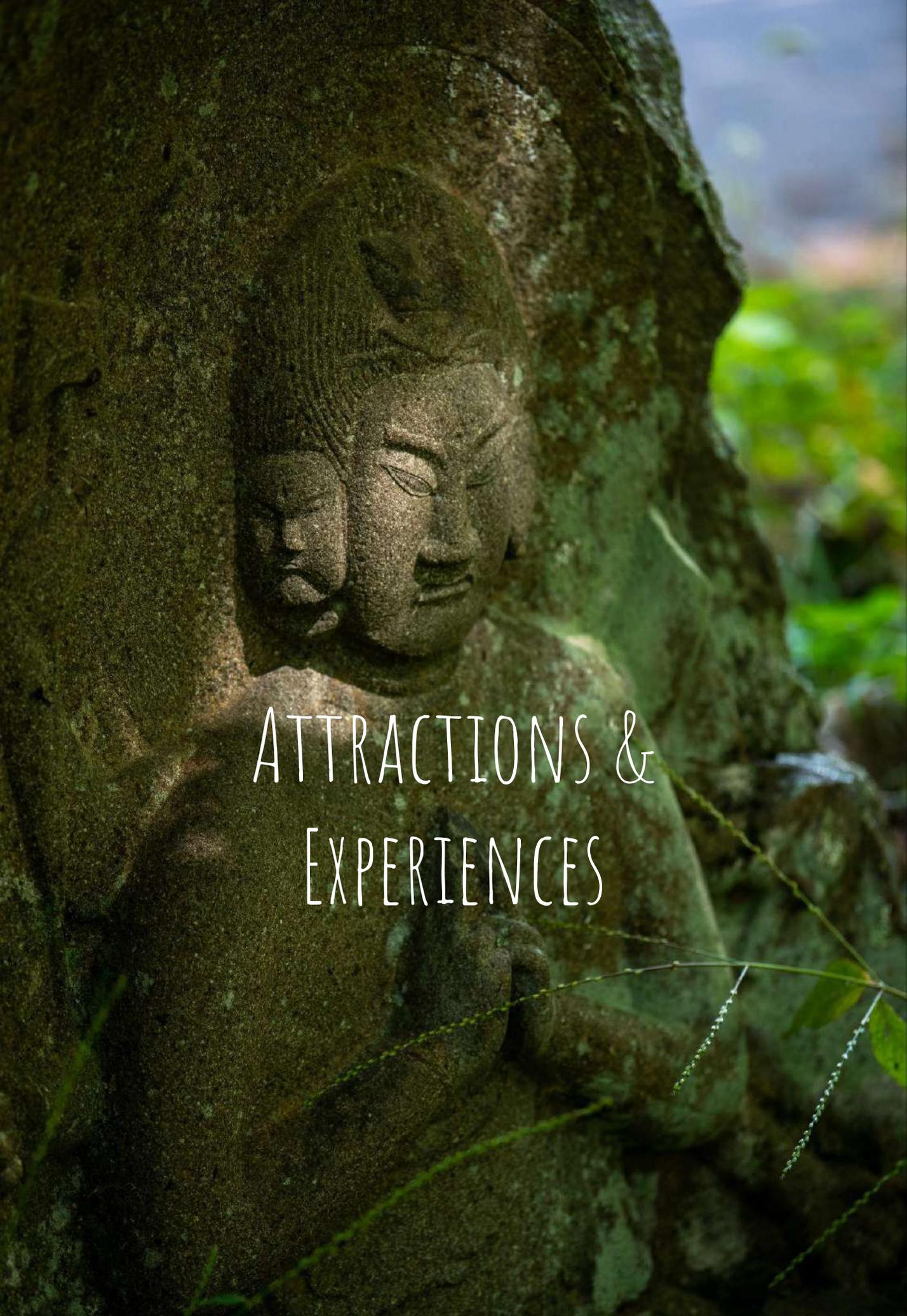
## Azumino

Azumino's snowmelt springs feed vast wasabi fields, orchards, and quiet satoyama landscapes. It's ideal for gentle cycling through rural roads, waterways, and villages shaped by pure-water agriculture.

## Zenkoji Kaidō

The Zenkoji Kaidō is an ancient pilgrimage route leading to Zenkoji Temple, one of Japan's most important Buddhist sites. Ideal for walking or cycling, it passes quiet hamlets, temples, and fields, offering a story-rich view of rural Japan shaped by centuries of devotional travel.





ATTRACTIONS &  
EXPERIENCES

# RURAL MATSUMOTO CYCLING



Group Size	2-6
Duration	3 hours
Notes	E-bike; distance customizable



A scenic e-bike journey through the rural landscapes of Azumino, with the Northern Alps rising in the distance. Visit wasabi farms and orchards, meet the local producers who work the land, and enjoy moments of calm at a local café along with a seasonal lunch. Spend a relaxing day in Azumino, where nature and human life blend in perfect harmony.



## Your Host

Since 2013, Yukie-san has been based in Hakuba Village, Nagano, working as an outdoor guide. She plans, operates, and leads e-bike and cycling tours set against the stunning backdrop of the Northern Alps. She has also been involved in organizing major events such as the Alps Azumino Century Ride and the Kiso Ontake Gran Fondo, helping promote the region's charm and build community through cycling.



# THE HERITAGE WALK OF MATSUMOTO



Group Size	2-6
Duration	3 hours
Notes	E-bike; distance customizable



A gentle walking journey through Matsumoto's castle town, shaped by pure spring water and centuries of refined craftsmanship. Stroll from Matsumoto Castle to Yohashira Shrine, continuing through Nakamachi and Nawate streets, where historic storehouses and lively arcades reveal the city's distinctive aesthetic. Along the way, visit a long-established sake brewery and sample water from a famed local spring, tasting the clarity that defines Matsumoto's culture. A relaxed urban walk that offers an intimate introduction to the city's history, beauty, and everyday life.



## Your Host

Since 2013, Yukie-san has been based in Hakuba Village, Nagano, working as an outdoor guide. She plans, operates, and leads e-bike and cycling tours set against the stunning backdrop of the Northern Alps. She has also been involved in organizing major events such as the Alps Azumino Century Ride and the Kiso Ontake Gran Fondo, helping promote the region's charm and build community through cycling.



To make a reservation, please scan the QR code



# THE BEAUTY OF KISO LACQUERWARE

Group Size	2-8
Duration	2 hours
Notes	Lacquerware-making workshop (additional fee)



Experience the living craft of Kiso lacquerware in the artisan town of Kiso-Hirasawa, where this centuries-old tradition still shapes daily life. Visit historic workshops to learn how natural lacquer is built into a deep, luminous finish, and meet the makers who sustain this heritage. Explore studios from classical craft to modern design and see artisans at work up close.



## Your Host

Tezuka-san is a seventh-generation owner of a long-established lacquerware wholesaler in Kiso-Hirasawa. After graduating from university, he trained at a lacquerware wholesaler in Tokyo and further honed his skills as a craftsman himself. His work seeks to update the traditional designs of Kiso lacquerware for modern life. A recipient of international awards, he now manages both the shop and workshop in Kiso-Hirasawa, where he continues to create new works and mentor young artisans.



# WHERE QUIET MOUNTAINS CRAFT WINES WITH PURPOSE — SHIOJIRI.

Group Size	2–8
Duration	3 hours
Notes	Participants must be 20 or over.



A full-day exploration of Shiojiri's mountain vineyards, where cool climates and thoughtful craftsmanship have shaped one of Japan's most respected wine regions. Visit pioneering wineries such as Goichi Wine, SunSun Winery, and Kōnishi Winery to walk vineyard slopes, meet passionate winemakers, and sample a wide range of estate and limited-production wines. Along the way, enjoy carefully paired food and rare tastings that reveal the past, present, and future of Shiojiri wine. An immersive journey through terroir, innovation, and the quiet beauty of Japan's alpine wine country.

## Your Host

Since 2013, Yukie-san has been based in Hakuba Village, Nagano, working as an outdoor guide. She plans, operates, and leads e-bike and cycling tours set against the stunning backdrop of the Northern Alps. She has also been involved in organizing major events such as the Alps Azumino Century Ride and the Kiso Ontake Gran Fondo, helping promote the region's charm and build community through cycling.

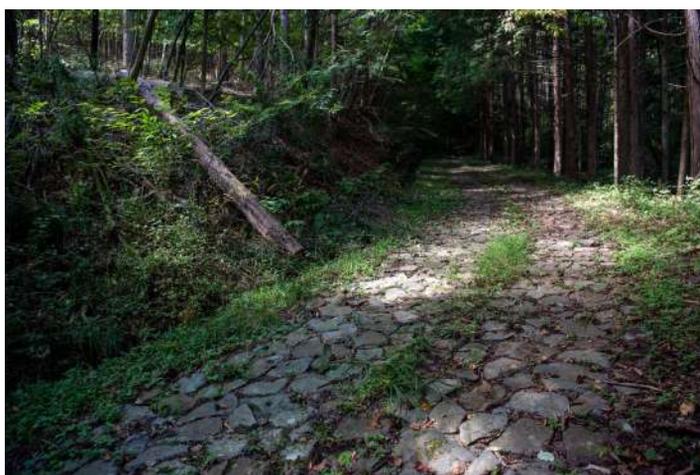


To make a reservation, please scan the QR code



# THE ZENKOJI KAIDO PILGRIMAGE

Group Size	2-6
Duration	3-4 hours
Notes	E-bike and/or hiking; distance customizable



Walk or cycle the Zenkoji Kaidō, an ancient pilgrimage route that has carried prayers toward Zenkoji Temple for over 1,400 years. Moving through terraced fields, quiet hamlets, and soft mountain ridgelines, you encounter the gentle rhythm of everyday rural life. This is a peaceful journey where nature, history, and reflection blend with each step.



## Your Host

Tamura-san is an experienced mountain guide leading routes from historical roads and satoyama trails to alpine ascents and advanced variation routes using map navigation. Deeply knowledgeable in the history, faith, geology, and geography of Japan's mountains, he guides across the Northern, Central, and Southern Alps, Yatsugatake, and beyond. Through trail maintenance, foraging for mountain vegetables and mushrooms, Shugendō (mountain ascetic) practices, and hunting, he passes down the wisdom and spirit of Japan's mountain people to the next generation.





## **Sun Sun Winery**

Sun Sun Winery is one of the region's largest and most established wineries, set among gentle hills and vineyards with wide views toward the Alps. Visitors can enjoy a full winery experience, including a tasting bar, shop, and restaurant, with a spacious outdoor deck that pairs the wines perfectly with the surrounding landscape. The wines show impressive regional character, and the experience could be elevated further with tastings on the terrace accompanied by local cheese, fruit, or small bites that reflect the area's produce and craft culture. As drinking while cycling is prohibited, we recommend scheduling winery visits at the end of the ride and returning to the hotel by car.



### **Chill Out Coffee**

Chill Out Coffee is a small café with world-class coffee served in an unexpectedly cinematic setting. Wingback armchairs face a large picture window that frames wide rice fields and distant alpine ridgelines, creating a space where guests can sit, sip, and simply take in the view. It's a perfect restorative stop on a cycling tour.

## **Shiga Canyon & Iwai Kannon-dō**

Shiga Canyon is a dramatic, little-known natural site where layered sedimentary walls rise suddenly from a quiet rural landscape, creating an unexpected geological spectacle. The surrounding red pine forests give the area a dry, open feel distinct from the lush satoyama valleys nearby. Carved directly into the cliffside, Iwai Kannon-dō and its magai-butsu figures add a layer of sacred history, hinting at the site's former role in mountain worship and early pilgrimage traditions. Though currently undeveloped, this is an outstanding stop for itineraries focused on hidden spiritual landscapes, cycling detours, or natural wonders along historic routes such as the Zenkoji Kaidō.



## Ishimoto Gyokusui Lacquer Studio

Ishimoto Gyokusui Lacquer Studio is a small, unassuming workshop run by an elderly husband-and-wife team.

He creates traditional lacquerware with a playful, personal touch, while she produces exquisite lacquer paintings that would not be out of place in a gallery or museum. The studio has a deeply authentic atmosphere—guests can observe the pair working quietly at their benches, gaining rare insight into a lifetime of refined craft.



## Matsumoto Castle

A National Treasure and one of Japan's most beautifully preserved original castles, Matsumoto Castle rises in striking black-and-white contrast against the sky and surrounding Alps. Its wooden interior, steep stairways, and intact defensive design offer a vivid sense of 16th-century history, while the broad moat and quiet grounds create a serene setting for exploration. It remains the cultural anchor of Matsumoto City and an essential highlight for any itinerary in the region.

## Narai-juku

Narai-juku is one of the most atmospheric post towns on the Nakasendō, known for its preserved streets, quality accommodations, and refined yet relaxed ambience. Located less than 3 km from Kiso-Hirasawa, it naturally pairs with lacquerware visits. Guests can walk or cycle the old road between the two, and continue on their journey or - if the timing is right - return by a scenic 3 minute train ride.



A traditional Japanese garden path made of stepping stones, surrounded by lush greenery and a building in the background. The path is composed of large, flat, grey stones set in a bed of light-colored gravel. The garden is filled with various plants, including tall green grasses, smaller green shrubs, and trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of red, orange, and yellow. A small, square, white lantern is visible on the left side of the path. In the background, a white building with a dark roof is partially visible through the trees.

# ACCOMMODATION

## Satoyama Villa Honjin

A beautifully restored estate once used as a honjin — an official lodging for the regional daimyō on his journey to Edo — Satoyama Villa Honjin combines historical gravitas with modern luxury. The interiors are tastefully layered with samurai aesthetics, yet the rooms feel spacious and refined, each with a private en-suite bath. In the main house, traditional fusuma partitions may offer less sound insulation than Western guests expect, but the two rooms in the kura provide excellent privacy and tranquility. With French-influenced cuisine and an atmosphere that echoes the spirit of medieval travel, this property is a perfect fit for guests journeying along the Zenkoji Kaidō cycling route.



## Matsumoto Jūjō

A contemporary retreat that blends postmodern design with the restorative calm of a hot-spring hotel. Each guestroom features its own private onsen, while the property's centerpiece — an impressive bookstore curated by its publishing-house owner — gives it a distinctly creative, intellectual atmosphere. The hotel is ideal for moderate luxury travellers seeking Western-style comfort or a break from ryokan formality. With shuttle service to the station and nearby attractions, it offers an easy, stylish base for exploring Matsumoto and its surrounding valleys.



## Byaku Narai

Byaku Narai is a four-star boutique hotel that has transformed several historic buildings in Narai-juku into refined accommodations where traditional architecture meets contemporary comfort. The rooms are beautifully designed, maintaining the warmth and texture of the post town's heritage while offering a calm, modern sensibility. The cuisine is rooted in local specialties — including carp — and while a vegetarian course is available, the kitchen's focus on regional ingredients may limit menu flexibility. Set within one of the most atmospheric stretches of the Nakasendō, Byaku Narai provides an immersive and elegant base for exploring the historic town of Narai.



# ITINERARIES





# KISO TO MATSUMOTO 1 NIGHT, 2 DAYS ITINERARY

## Day 1: Kiso-Hirasawa & Matsumoto

Arrive in Narai the previous day and stay at Byaku Narai. After breakfast, walk 30 minutes to Kiso-Hirasawa, or take the 3 minute 09:17 local train, and enjoy the *Beauty of Kiso Lacquerware* experience with visits to family-run ateliers. Afterward, a private car brings you to Matsumoto, stopping for lunch and a wine tasting at Sun Sun Winery or at one of the region's excellent soba shops. Upon arrival, enjoy free time to explore the city's craft shops and charming neighborhoods, or visit the Matsumoto City Museum of Art to see works by Yayoi Kusama, a Matsumoto native. Check into Hotel Matsumoto Jūjō to relax in your private or communal hot spring, followed by a wood-fired dinner at the accommodation, or a sumptuous course menu at Soranokanata.



## Day 2: Matsumoto

After breakfast, visit Matsumoto Castle, one of Japan's finest original keeps, before transferring to nearby Azumino for a gentle e-bike ride through its spring-fed countryside. Stop for lunch along the way and tailor the route to guest preferences with visits to a wasabi farm, a world-class local ice-cream shop, or a restorative break at Chill Out Coffee.



# MATSUMOTO & ZENKOJI KAIDO 1 NIGHTS, 2 DAYS ITINERARY



## Day 1: Zenkoji Kaidō to Satoyama Villa Honjin

Enjoy a full day of guided cycling along the tranquil Zenkoji Kaidō, moving through quiet hamlets, fields, and forested foothills that have carried pilgrims toward Zenkoji Temple for centuries. Pause for lunch at the local favorite Hijiri Hive Beer & Café, a welcoming spot that reflects the warmth of the region.

In the late afternoon, check in to Satoyama Villa Honjin, a beautifully restored former honjin inn along the historic route. Settle into its refined, atmospheric spaces and enjoy dinner at the accommodation.



## Day 2: Nagano City & Zenkoji Temple

After breakfast, take a one-hour private transfer to Nagano City and visit the historic Zenkoji Temple, one of Japan's most important Buddhist sites. From here, guests can board the shinkansen back to Tokyo or continue onward to Toyama or Kanazawa.

# HIGH ALPINE HORIZONS: NORIKURA & KAMIKOCHI



## Day 1: Norikura Highlands & Tatamidaira → Kamikochi

Begin the day traveling into the Norikura Highlands, an alpine area where even first-time visitors can comfortably reach high elevations. Using local transportation, ascend to Tatamidaira, located just below the summit of Mount Norikura. From Tatamidaira, enjoy a guided walk and gentle climb toward the summit, taking in expansive views across the Northern Alps.

In the afternoon, transfer to Kamikochi. After arrival, enjoy a short walk along the Azusa River before checking in to a lodge or ryokan within the valley.



## Day 2: Sunrise in Kamikochi

Rise early to experience sunrise in Kamikochi, as morning light gradually illuminates the peaks of the Northern Alps and the river below. After breakfast, there is time for a relaxed morning walk through the valley before departing Kamikochi and continuing onward to Matsumoto or the next destination.





FOLLOW US TO MATSUMOTO!



**Matsumoto Region Union**