

Hotels to seek out again and again

また行きたい **宿** を探して

Restaurant in a hotel,
or hotel in a restaurant?

Takashimaya

- Registered Tangible Cultural Property Echigo Iwamuro Spa

This inn at the Echigo Iwamuro spa elicits feelings of nostalgia even on the first visit.

Takashimaya offers kaiseki banquet cuisine made from local ingredients and unpretentious, unobtrusive hospitality in an historic building. Time spent in soul-soothing lodgings like these has to be an indulgence of the highest order.

Photos: Yuko Iida Text: Hayato Nakatsuki



The friendly proprietress, a much-loved local character, offers a warm welcome to travelers.

The Takashimaya inn at the Echigo Iwamuro spa is a firm favorite with celebrities. On his way home from a night there, veteran actor Tetsuya Takeda reportedly declared, "Everything is just right". People in Echigo (now part of Niigata Prefecture) know Takashimaya as the former home of a village headman. But what makes it so captivating for seasoned travelers from further afield?

Defeated in the siege of Osaka Castle Takashimaya's beginnings can be traced back to a samurai from the village of Tanaka, which was located in the Takashima District in the old province of Omi far to the west of Echigo. In 1615 clan head Hidetaka Takashima fought in the siege of Osaka Castle on the side of Toyotomi Hideyori, but lost. As a result, his son Sagoemon Masataka fled his native land, passing through Echizen (now the northern part of Fukui Prefecture) before settling in Iwamuro as a blacksmith. In the Edo period Masataka took on the role of headman, becoming responsible for the governance of the village. In 1878 the Meiji emperor rested at Takashimaya, which was by then an inn, during a tour of the Hokuriku region. The inn's main building was originally a mansion built 260 years ago in the Edo period.

On entering the spacious front entrance hall you will see the reception area immediately ahead. After removing your shoes, you will find yourself naturally guided toward a shared living room on the left. There you will see a grandfather clock marking time in stately fashion, a traditional fireplace, and thick roof beams built to withstand heavy snow. Neither too big nor too cramped. You'll feel the weight fall from your shoulders at once.

Where shogi

champions clash

All guest rooms are fitted out in uncluttered traditional Japanese style. Three rooms have outdoor baths, and there is also an annex in the style of a traditional house. The special "Tokiwa" room, which offers views of a bamboo grove, is also known as "Taikyoku no Ma" and is a frequent venue for shogi and go competitions (taikyoku meaning to play a board game of this sort). This year the fourth round of the Kisei shogi title tournament was due to be held in Tokiwa on July 15, but title-holder Yoshiharu Habu won the first three matches consecutively, eliminating the need for a fourth.

The communal baths draw water from the Iwamuro hot spring, actually said to have been discovered by a Takashimaya forebear. It makes for a fascinating story: in 1713, a white-haired old man appeared at the bedside of one Shozaemon Takashima and told him to search Iwamuro in a certain way. When he followed these instructions, Takashima encountered a wild goose soaking in spring water to soothe a wound. The Iwamuro spa is therefore also known by the alternative name of "water of the ghost goose".

Wining and dining

Echigo/Niigata is widely known as a rice-producing region. Good fishing grounds nearby also make it a great location for fresh seafood.

The head chef at Takashimaya carefully selects the best of these ingredients for each part year and designs menus to complement the changing seasons. Typically this will be a range of kaiseki dishes starting with pre-dinner snacks and proceeding to soup, sashimi, grilled, simmered and fried dishes. When beautifully-presented food prepared with no effort or expense spared is combined



Niigata is a land of stunning scenic beauty. After the snow melts, the fields become a riot of spring flowers. Summer skies are a startling blue by day and filled with fireworks by night, while in autumn the mountains shimmer with vibrant reds and golds. When winter comes, the landscape begins to resemble an ink painting, a world shut off by snow.



with sake from local breweries, the results are amazing, each dish taking on an especially exquisite flavor. This is why Takashimaya is known as "the restaurant you can stay at", and many guests come here specifically for the food.

Everything is just right

A stately high-end ryokan polished to gleaming perfection inside and out is certainly a place many of us would love to visit. Conversely though, if the opportunity does arise, it can be hard to relax amid what can be slightly intimidating surroundings. However, for those who believe that nothing beats escaping everyday routines for some well-deserved time out, Takashimaya is a wonderful find. It has also served as the face of this area since the Edo period. The unpretentious, hospitable proprietress and head receptionist deploy networks built up through the generations to cater to the traveler's every requirement. What better service could one ask for from a hotel?



Head chef Yasushi Kaneko uses only the finest Niigata ingredients to serve up a kaiseki banquet (photo left). A la carte choices include salt-grilled blackthroat seaperch (photo right), fugu sashimi (mid-November to around February) and wagyu beef steak.

DATA



Koshi no Yado Takashimaya
Price ¥19,500-¥44,500 (DBB per person, incl. tax)
Location 678 Ko, Iwamuro-Onsen, Nishi-kan-ku, Niigata Prefecture
Tel. 0256-82-2001
http://takasimaya.co.jp