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Travel Back in Time to Nihon Minka-En



It's a Saturday around noon and the village seems deserted. Although the water mill wheel is turning and firewood is stacked in a shed, the tools are all tidily stored away and the stables are empty. Doors and windows of the houses and shops are wide open, as if a rabble of samurai has chased the inhabitants away. In fact, men with swords tucked into their obis and kimono-clad women would not be out of place amongst the Edo era buildings of Nihon Minka-En.

This open air folk house museum in the hills, a short trip from Yokohama, at Tama Ward in Kawasaki city celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Its 25 principal buildings are mostly grouped together to form

small villages according to their origins in different parts of the country. A number of the houses are designated as national important cultural properties. Each main building has an explanation in both Japanese and English about its design, construction and use, as well as information about its former residents. An explanatory brochure and a map in English are also available.

Visitors can enter the earthen-floored *doma* of most houses, and see where the inhabitants had their kitchens and kept horses. Visitors can also see the floored sections with *irori* sunken hearths where families would eat, sleep and make their handicrafts, as well as special rooms reserved for guests.

Entering through the main gate, the first village is a Post-Road town, with a horse-traders' thatched roof hostel from Fukushima Prefecture, a tiled-roof merchant's house from Nara, and a stone-laid shingle-roofed house from Nagano Prefecture that served as a pharmacy and medicine wholesaler.

Up the hill near the water mill most of the houses in Shin-Etsu village are of the *Gassho-Zukuri* styles of Toyama and Gifu Prefectures, with steep thatched roofs built to withstand heavy snowfalls. Each is slightly different in its construction.

From Shin-Etsu, the path winds past a storehouse on stilts from an island in the Amami Archipelago in Kagoshima Prefecture and a fisherman's house from Chiba. Other houses from the Kantō area are nearby, including several from Kanagawa Prefecture. The Kitamura farmhouse, with its raised bamboo floor, was originally built in Hadano city in 1687. The Kiyomiya farmhouse is from Noborito, near the site of the museum. Two of the smallest

buildings are a shrine for a silkworm deity built during the 1860s in Kawasaki city and a 1929 ferryman's hut once used to cross the Tamagawa river.

The final village in the museum is representative of the Tōhoku region. Snowfalls may be as heavy as those endured by the *Gassho-zukuri* seen in Shin-Etsu village, but the designs are different. The Sugawara house from Yamagata Prefecture has dormer style windows in the roof that could be used as a doorway when the snow was deep. There is also an L-shaped style of house, known as *Magariya*, from Iwate Prefecture that is typical of Tōhoku houses.

Folk tool making demonstrations are sometimes held and there is a traditional indigo-dye workshop space near the west gate. There are picnic tables and rest areas scattered throughout the grounds, so Nihon Minka-En makes a great family day out. In addition, one of the *Gassho-Zukuri* functions as a soba restaurant. At a cost of only 500 yen for adults, in a few hours visitors can virtually travel back in time and imagine life in a variety of pre-modern houses from different parts of Japan.

Nihon Minka-En is easily reached by walking for about 13 minutes straight from Mukogaoka-yuen station on the Odakyu line. For further information, including access maps, opening times, events and entry fees, see the museum's English website at <http://www.city.kawasaki.jp/88/88min ka/home/minka.htm>.

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