

This weekend I had the chance to go back to yet another place that I had visited the first time I came to Japan. I took a road trip with three friends, and after a few hours of driving and traffic on Saturday morning, we found ourselves in the north of Gifu Prefecture, in Takayama!

On Saturday we visited a village that I had never visited, or even heard of, before. A short drive through the mountains from Takayama was a small village of very old homes with thatched roofs, called Shirakawago. I was surprised to find that this place seemed almost untouched by the bright lights of tourism that have tainted so many popular spots around the world. Sure, this village had its own line of Kitty-chan merchandise, a few omiyage shops along the road and a fair amount of soft serve ice cream, but it didn't take away from the local charm. We had a chance to walk around in the afternoon and see the sights before having our dinner at the ryokan where we were staying that night. I loved the special hobamiso that we had (for lunch and dinner) and was happy to try Hida beef, too. The food at the ryokan was great, but so was the atmosphere. We actually stayed in one of the old homes with a thatched roof, and especially with the cold mountain weather, it made for a very good night's sleep.

The next morning we got up early because we just happened to be there on the most unique day of the year! I learned that in Shirakawago, they have a special fire drill every year since the homes, made of wood and straw, are at risk of catching fire easily. By the force of gravity, water from the mountains is pumped into a fire hydrant next to each home. A long time ago, these villagers had a fire drill each year to ensure that their pumps weren't getting rusty. While they don't need to worry about this anymore, it has become a tradition, and once a year they have an 8 am fire drill, sending huge streams of water shooting up into the air.

I haven't told many of my friends at home about this experience just yet. I have a feeling that people are going to think I've lost it when I tell them that I was so excited to see this special fire drill. But it is something really unique and meaningful in that village, and I was really happy to get to see it. We also went to Takayama that day, where I had been with my mom the first time I came to Japan. I was surprised at what things I remembered from my first visit and what things I did not. Since it was raining on Sunday and we didn't want to come back late that night, we didn't stay very long. But I made sure that I had enough time to find kurumi miso so I can try cooking with hobamiso at home.