

SHONAI: A HIDDEN CULTURAL GEM OF JAPAN



Japan's Golden Route takes visitors around some of the nation's most famous tourist locations from Tokyo to Kyoto and Osaka, and everything in between. It's a great route to follow for a first-time visitor, but those who want a taste of what Japan is like outside of the main tourist traps should give Shonai a try.

Where is Shonai?

The Shonai region is located on the western side of Yamagata Prefecture in the northeastern area of Japan. It is uniquely situated between the Sea of Japan to the west and mountains to the north, east, and south. For centuries, the Mogami River was the only real transport artery connecting the natural riches of Shonai to the rest of the world. These days, its commercial and cultural hubs Tsuruoka City and Sakata City are easily accessible and a joy to explore for both the casual tourist and savvy traveler.

A Unique Cultural Legacy

Because Shonai was historically hard to get to, its local culture retained unique characteristics — even within Japan — and it became a melting pot of customs. The centuries-old spiritual traditions of the three mountains of Dewa, known as the Dewa Sanzan, remain strong — even now people go on annual pilgrimages to get back to nature and reconnect with themselves. The old ships known as Kitamaebune (literally northbound ship) brought culture from Kyoto on the Mogami River for centuries and traces of this connection can still be found in Sakata City today. During the Edo period (1603-1868), Shonai was a feudal domain headed by the Sakai clan samurai, who were vassals to Japan's ruler, the Tokugawa shogun. Because they had to visit the capital regularly, they brought back customs they learned in the big city. Finally, Shonai also shares cultural affinity with other areas in Tohoku, the northern region it belongs to geographically.

Experience Shonai Through Traditions That Live on Today

Part of Shonai's charm lies in the preservation of ancient traditions while still innovating and creating new practices. Take a stroll around the city area and you'll find a mix of old houses and contemporary designs — both of which will take your breath away. But instead of just seeing what Shonai offers, visitors should experience it firsthand. Here are some of the unique activities visitors can still enjoy today.

Candle Painting at Togashi Candle Shop

Back in the Edo period when the lords of Shonai visited Japan's capital city to pay their respects to the shogun, they would bring exquisite and expensive gifts. One of the most notable ones were hand-painted candles with elaborate designs in bright colors. The tradition of creating beautiful candles remains and visitors are welcome to paint their own candle to take home as a souvenir. It takes less than an hour to do and is fun for all ages. Reservations required. experiencetsuruoka.com/Togashi-Candle-Shop/

Maiko Dance Performance at Somaro Tea House

One of the many cultural imports from Kyoto via the Kitamaebune ships was geisha entertainment. Though this tradition was lost for many years, you can now experience a true maiko performance at Somaro Tea House in Sakata City. There are two performances daily — one at noon including an exquisite bento lunch, and one at 2pm, with just the dance. Their delicate movements are spellbinding as they weave stories through their steps. After the show, take the opportunity to take pictures with the maiko and then take time to explore the expansive property and its treasures.

<https://www.somaro.net/englishhome>

Kasafuku Decoration Making at Sanno Club

Just a stone's throw away from Somaro Tea House lies Sanno Club, a stately wooden building full of unique architectural quirks and beautiful artwork, known as kasafuku. Kasafuku (literally “umbrella” and “good fortune”) decorations were made by women to protect their babies from harm and wish them good health. They would pray as they sewed, then dedicate the decorations to a local shrine or temple. They would then be hung up on umbrella-like stands to protect the decorations from harmful spirits. These days, kasafuku decorations are often given as gifts at weddings and to celebrate births. Visitors can try their hand at making their own kasafuku here. A teacher is on site most days, but call in advance to confirm — especially if attending in a larger group.

sannou.matizukuri.info

For tour information about Shonai: <https://www.odysseyjapan.com/shonai/>

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