

**BRIEF:** The following are extracts from a project where I provided texts for explanatory signboards across Yamanashi prefecture. I supplied 43 of these in total. All required extensive JP/EN-language research and fact-checking.

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### **Tabayama and the legends of Nanatsuishi Shrine**

Nestled in the northeastern mountains of Yamanashi Prefecture, the tiny village of Tabayama plays an outsized role in the lives of Tokyoites. The village is home to the Tamba River, which empties into Lake Okutama and flows onwards to the Tama River, one of Tokyo's most important sources of water.

While avid hikers flock to climb the neighbouring Mt. Kumotori—the highest mountain in Tokyo at 2,017m, now popularly associated with the critically-acclaimed animation *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*—the nearby Mt. Nanatsuishi holds tremendous cultural significance for Tabayama Village.

The mountain derives its name from the seven limestone rocks near its summit, literally 'nanatsu ishi.' The folk legends vary: some say these stones are the seven warriors accompanying Heian period samurai Taira no Masakado, as he fled after being defeated in battle at Ibaraki. Others say these were the straw decoys Masakado had made before his adversary, Tawara no Touta, found him. Though Masakado hid himself among them, he was felled by Touta's arrow, and turned to stone along with the other straw decoys. His spirit is enshrined in Nanatsuishi Shrine, also located near the top of the mountain.

Dating back to at least the mid-Edo period (1603–1868), Nanatsuishi Shrine is also dedicated to the wolf, as evidenced by the wolf statues—guardian dogs—guarding its precincts. Though wolves have presumably been extinct in Japan for over a century, they were once revered and worshipped as 'messengers of the mountain gods.' Just as wolves once hunted deer and boar in the mountains, Tabayama too was once a village of hunters and farmers, and were likely to have dwelt in symbiosis with the wolves. Even today, a few local hunters still pray to the gods for safety and good hunting in the mountains, and leave offerings of salt for the wolf deities.

### **Aokigahara Forest**

Alternately known as the 'Sea of Trees,' Aokigahara Forest is a dense, primeval forest of mixed coniferous and broadleaf trees stretching across 30km<sup>2</sup>. The forest floor consists of volcanic rock, thanks to the lava flow from Mt. Fuji's last major eruption in 864 A.D. which hardened and cooled to form the base for Aokigahara.

The cool, humid environment of Aokigahara makes ideal growing conditions for bryophytes, with a rich variety of lush green mosses and lichen. In general, the forest is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, including deer, foxes, wild rabbits, and various kinds of birds. However, the heavy silence belies the presence of animal life in the forest: porous lava tends to absorb sound easily, which may account for the quiet atmosphere.

Aokigahara Forest has had a historical reputation as a home to *yūrei*, or ghosts of the dead. More recently, it has acquired an unfortunate reputation for being one of the world's most-used suicide sites, with recorded suicides in the forest having risen since the 1950s. Japanese spiritualists believe that this has generated paranormal activity in the forest, preventing many visitors from escaping its dense depths.

Designated hiking paths connect the three major ice caves in the Aokigahara area: Narusawa Ice Cave, Fugaku Wind Cave, and the West Lake Bat Cave. It is a common misconception that compasses are rendered useless by the rich deposits of magnetic iron in the area's volcanic soil; compasses used in the forest will behave as expected when held at normal height. Nevertheless, visitors are advised against straying from the official paths.

### **Sarubashi Bridge**

Spanning the gorge of the Katsura River in Ōtsuki City, Sarubashi Bridge is considered one of Japan's Three Bridges, and an official Place of Scenic Beauty in Japan. It is 3.3m wide, 30.9m long, and is perched about 31m above the river below. This elegant arch bridge is perhaps the best-known example of the *hanebashi* style, in which a bridge is supported by a series of cantilever beams set in the opposing cliff faces. It has undergone several renovations and restorations over time, and the present bridge is reinforced by concrete.

Exactly when a bridge was first constructed at this site is unclear. One legend tells of a story in which monkeys bridged the chasm with their bodies, so that a couple could cross the ravine. A gardener by the name of Shirahiko allegedly constructed the bridge after witnessing this event around 610. Yet another story notes that the original rickety plank structure was so precarious that "only an agile monkey could cross it." Monkeys are the common theme threading these tales together, giving the bridge its name.

The present bridge's design dates back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was an official part of the Koshu Kaido, one of the main highways of the Edo period (1603–1868) connecting Edo and Kai Province (present-day Yamanashi). *Hanebashi* designs were not uncommon during this time, but Sarubashi had the distinction of a particularly scenic and memorable setting, inspiring artworks by notable artists like Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige.

### **Hanasaki Honjin**

During the Edo period (1603–1868), there were five major highways connecting Edo and other parts of Japan. The historic Kōshū Kaidō route led from Edo to Kai Province, today Yamanashi Prefecture. Villages along the highway were known as post-towns, and they had inns and various facilities catering to travellers; the finest inn was known as a *honjin*, typically reserved for exclusive use by feudal lords and high-ranking shogunate officials travelling to and from the capital.

The Hoshino Family Residence is one such *honjin*, located in what was once the post-town of Shimo-Hanasaki. As the name suggests, it belonged to the Hoshino family, who as the head family of the town served as local lord and wholesaler, though towards the end of the Edo period they were also engaged in the medicine business.

The existing main building was rebuilt between 1849 and 1851 after the original was destroyed by fire in 1835. The two-story wooden structure with gabled roofs faces south, and the high railings on the second floor were once used for loading and unloading silkworms. The inn welcomed many distinguished guests, most notably the Meiji Emperor in 1880, and his room has been preserved in its original state. Several of the buildings, including the main house, rice storehouse, miso storehouse, and library storehouse, were designated as National Important Cultural Properties in 1976.

Today, the back of the building houses the Fuji Natto Factory, where descendants of the Hoshino family have produced natto, or fermented soybeans, for the last 80-odd years. Made using a blend of Canadian soybeans, locally-grown Ōtsuki soybeans, and Mt. Fuji spring water, Fuji Natto is one of the locality's most popular souvenirs.

### **Matozama**

Many tributaries and streams flow from the mountains into the Dōshi River that runs through the village. This particular tributary below, the Murokobo River, has a rather unusual feature: a circular rock with white concentric circles on granite, resembling a target board submerged in water. It is referred to as 'matozama,' which can be loosely translated as 'the venerable target.'

According to lore, Minamoto Yoritomo, the founder of the first Kamakura shogunate (1192–1199), was visiting the area to undergo martial arts training. He built a tower in what is now the present-day Matoba district—located on the Yagurasawa River, on the other side of the Dōshi River about 4km away—and practiced shooting arrows from the top of the tower, aiming at the 'target'.

There once were three such 'targets' lined up every 10m along the upper stream. However, two of them were destroyed in typhoons, and now only one remains. It is said that when the rock is stroked, heavy rains will fall. The rock was enshrined and revered as a deity of water, and on 8 April every year a festival is held to pray for good harvests.