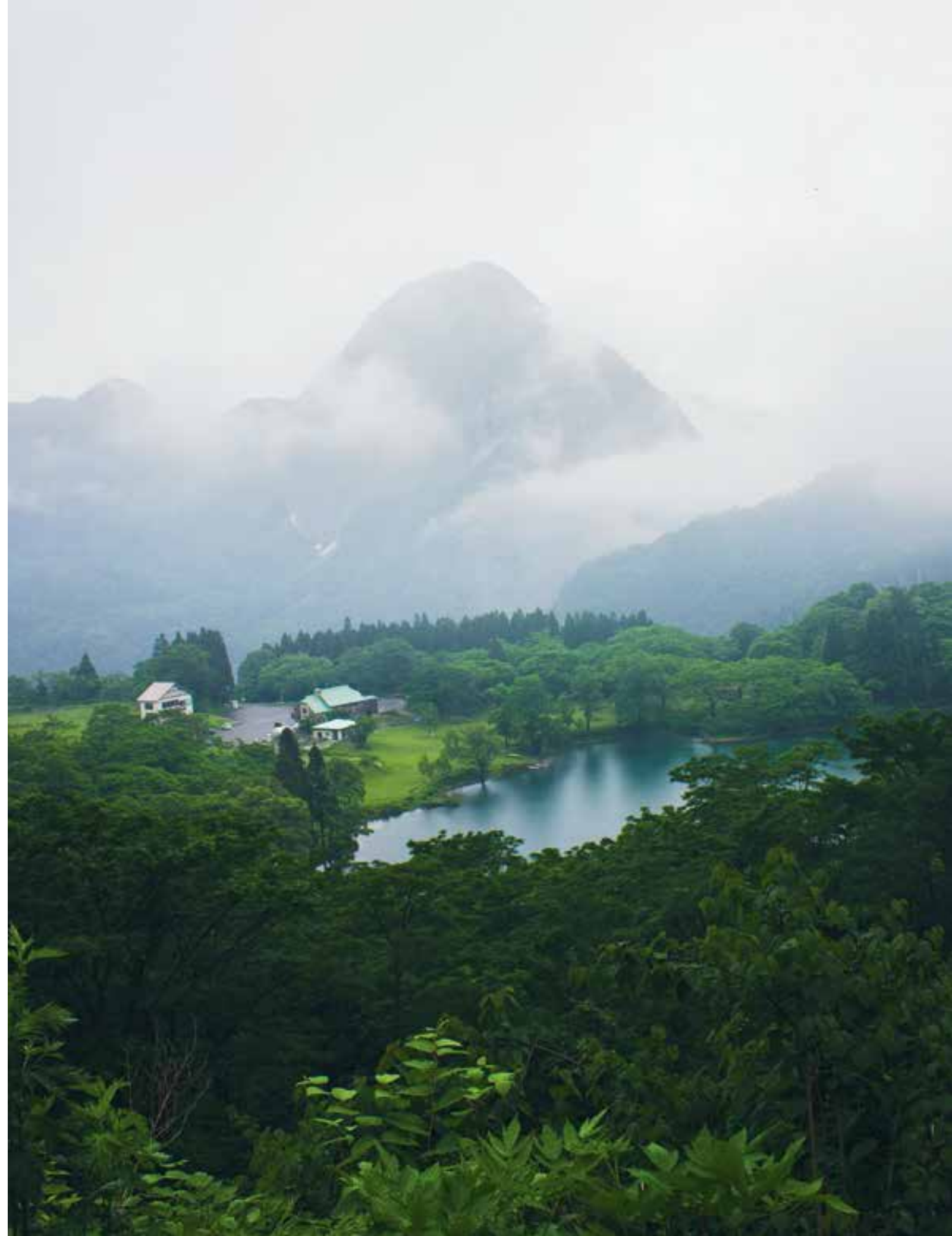


Niigata, Japan

This under-the-radar prefecture, just two hours from Tokyo by bullet train, won't stay secret for long.



The Gyokusendo copperware workshop in Tsubame (above); a rural scene in Niigata Prefecture (opposite)





Satoyama Jujo hotel in Minamiuonuma

Taste Japan's finest rice

At the secluded Satoyama Jujo hotel (en.satoyama-jujo.com), you know you're in for something special when dinner kicks off with a shot of "snow spring water" tapped from a maple tree only metres from the inn. "You'll taste sweetness and something flavourful from the forest," says chef Keiko Kuwakino. The nine-course feast at Sanaburi restaurant may include the wild bitter vegetable fukinoto soaked for three weeks and turned into ice-cream and lotus roots hand-ripped from the bottom of a frigid pond but it's the plain boiled rice that's touted as the highlight. Thanks to the heavy Niigata snowfalls, mineral-rich water flows from the mountains post-winter to grow Japan's number-one koshihikari rice. "Foreigners don't understand why it's so special when it's just rice but it's our identity," says

Kuwakino. Afterwards, roll into the open-air onsen to admire the Milky Way. The award-winning 13-room property in Minamiuonuma is centred around a 150-year-old building with wooden beams and warm lantern lights. Nab room 202 or 301 for the best views of Mount Makihata from the private, always steaming balcony baths.

Hit the slopes or take in the view

If you prefer your ski resorts sans the uncomfortably cold weather, Ishiuchi Maruyama ski resort (ishiuchi.or.jp) has you covered. Last August, the resort, 10 minutes from Echigo-Yuzawa train station, opened The Veranda, with a café, terrace and six dome tents – see-through polycarbonate igloos equipped with butterfly chairs, heating and wi-fi. Take a seven-minute ride to the summit

in a Sunrise Express gondola and hire a dome for an hour or two to appreciate the panorama across the Uonuma plain. At sunset, pull up a perch on the terrace and watch as the silver-white Echigo Mountains turn crimson. Or keep skiing – half of the 24 courses are lit until 8pm.

Go dining and geisha-spotting

About 150 years ago, when Niigata Prefecture had the largest population in Japan, its port city was a major trade hub. Back then, Niigata City's Furumachi was a bustling entertainment district and it still has some of the old-town ambience. Step back in time at the two-Michelin-starred restaurant Nabeyaya (nabedyaya.co.jp), which opened in 1846, and let the geisha, known locally as *geigi*, entertain you. For some of the best sushi in town, hunt down the hidden alley entrance to

Kei Sugimoto



Dried fish at salmon store Kikkawa in Murakami

Kyodai Sushi (kyodaisushi.gorp.jp). And in April, swing by Hakusan Park on the banks of Shinano River to see the cherry blossoms in bloom.

See where classic teapots are made

Amid the cacophony at the Gyokusendo workshop (gyokusendo.com) in the city of Tsubame, artisans on wooden stools hammer out copperware the same way they did when it opened more than two centuries ago. A seamless teapot fashioned from a single copper sheet carries a ¥700,000 price tag but it's a three-month process and a craft that takes more than 10 years to master. "Some customers have been using our copperware for three generations," says Gyokusendo's Matthew Headland. The twin cities of Tsubame and Sanjo are well-known for their metal tools and

tableware. Victoria Beckham apparently swears by her Suwada nail clippers, produced in Sanjo.

Sample salmon bits (and balls)

When you have hundreds of dried salmon hanging above your head, you notice their cranky faces (apparently they turn savage when they go back to the rivers where they were born). In Murakami, the castle town's favourite fish almost became extinct 250 years ago, until a samurai explained the salmon's life cycle. "The salmon is so special that we don't want to waste even one piece. That's why there are 100 dishes, not only meat and eggs but guts and bones," says Shinji Kikkawa, the 15th-generation owner of historic salmon shop Kikkawa (1-20 Omachi, Murakami-shi, Niigata; +81 25 453 2213). At Izutsuya restaurant

across the road, you can try every bit of the fish, including salmon testes that taste like salted caramel and look like guitar picks. No wonder those fish are grumpy.

Kick it with contemporary art

For a hit of Japanese and international contemporary art, head to the Museum on Echigo-Tsumari (MonET; echigo-tsumari.jp) in Tokamachi, staffed by players from the local women's football team (captain Misato Ishiwata runs the gift shop). In the heart of the 760-square-kilometre Echigo-Tsumari Art Field – more than 200 artworks across rice terraces, forests and abandoned buildings – the MonET has an outside pool that reflects the sky and architecture around it. "The building is an artwork in itself," says the football forward/PR officer Kisa Mori. In summer, kids can paddle in the



Tunnel of Light (2018) by MAD Architects at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field

water, while adults enjoy the works inside, such as *Movements* by art collective [mé], which features hundreds of metal clock mechanisms suspended from the ceiling to look like a flock of starlings.

Taste a sake smorgasbord

Where there's quality rice, there's quality sake, which explains the 90 sake breweries in Niigata Prefecture. The handiest is Imayo Tsukasa (imayotsukasa.co.jp), established in 1767 and only a 15-minute walk from Niigata train station. With a day's notice, they'll give you a free English-language tour of the brewery and, failing that, there's a comprehensive brochure and audio guide. Check out the finished product with two free samples or pony up ¥1000 for a premium tasting, choosing from at least 10 sakes. The award-winning KOI – with its orange-

and-white carp-like bottle design – is a cracking place to start. To try drops from every Niigata brewery, head to the Ponshukan store at Niigata, Nagaoka or Echigo-Yuzawa train stations. From its famous vending machines you can get five tokens for ¥500 to sample five cups of sake. You can even take a sake bath at the Echigo-Yuzawa branch.

Sleep in an artwork

Originally established to revitalise the depopulating rural area in 2000, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field and Triennale comprise festivals, guided tours and seasonal exhibitions all year round. (Kids will love snowshoe trekking and mushroom foraging.) You can even stay overnight in Serbian artist Marina Abramović's *Dream House*, a transformed, century-old mountain cottage. Don

a sleep suit and hop into a bed specially designed for the project then document your dreams in the Dream Book the next morning.

Soak up the serenity

Lie back in Rankeisou's alfresco onsen (rankei.com) and let the rushing crystal-clear Sumon River lull you into relaxation. "This salty water will heal your scratches or burns," says inn owner Yukari Ootake, whose husband's great-grandfather discovered the hot springs a century ago. "And if you drink it, it's good for the stomach." The water has an umami flavour, making the "hot spring porridge" here a breakfast hit. For dinner, try the historic 17-room property's carp sashimi, sweet potato brûlée and aged Wagyu beef cooked on a hot stone at the table. ●