

EXPERIENCE KESEN



Find your romantic adventure

We are grateful for all of the support and encouragement we have received from all over the world in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami.

We continue to move forward in our reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, but in order to truly rebuild, it is important to learn about the local history and culture, and then pass that on to the future. That's why we have compiled this brochure series showcasing the Kesen region of Iwate Prefecture as a historical and cultural tourist destination. Enjoy our second volume on the history of gold mining in the Kesen region.

Legends of Gold in the Kesen Region

During his travels through Asia, Marco Polo heard of a place called "Zipangu, the land of gold," which he wrote in his travelogue. Some say he is referring to the Kesen region of modern day Iwate.

In the Heian Period (794-1185), there existed an independent territory called Hiraizumi in what is now southern Iwate. Fujiwara no Kiyohira, the lord of Hiraizumi, built a golden hall called Konjikido within Chuson-ji Temple. However, the Nojiri gold mines and Kofugane gold mines in the district of Kesen had already been thriving for some time.

The area was actually known as the country's largest belt of gold dust, which stretched across the Iwai District in Mutsu Province (present day Iwate Prefecture), Motoyoshi District (present day Miyagi Prefecture) and Kesen District. This wealth of gold supported the Fujiwara Clan of Hiraizumi and their Golden Buddhist Culture.



Former gold mines in Kesen

Gold Mining

Types of Gold

There are three types of gold, depending on how they were mined: River/beach sand gold, ground gold (shiba gold) and rock gold (mountain gold).

River/Beach Sand Gold

This is gold that can be found on riverbeds or in the gravel along the coast. It was formerly called "water gold." If the gold nuggets are very minuscule and fine, they are also referred to as "rice bran gold" or "wheat bran gold." After the Meiji Era, this type of mining was very popular and could be seen in several locations throughout the country, but now people engage in it as purely a hobby.

Ground Gold

"Ground gold" are nuggets of gold that can be found in the ground in riversides, hills, cliffsides and so on. In the past, they were called "miyoshi gold" or "shiba gold." From ancient times to early modern times, along with river/beach sand gold, ground gold was also mined using open-pit and tunnel mining techniques.

Rock Gold

"Rock gold" or "mountain gold" is gold found through tunnel mining and excavating bedrocks of gold-bearing rocks. Threads of quarts or veins that contain rock gold were formerly called "kanezuru," "hi," "tsuru" or "kusari."



Sumita Folk Museum

Kamiarisu Elementary School, which was built with the great skill of the Kesen Carpenters in the beginning of the Showa Period, was relocated and rebuilt in 1985 where it is now used as a museum. Including the aforementioned gold mining information, several displays on the local industry and local peoples' lifestyles are displayed here.

Address 15-1 Sanmyakuchi, Kamiarisu, Sumita Town, Kesen District, Iwate Prefecture 029-2501

Try Gold Panning

The Kesen River in Sumita Town is the only place in Iwate Prefecture where you can try gold panning in a river.

Learn about the history of gold mining in Sumita with an instructor, then pan for gold at the river!

(※We cannot guarantee that you will find gold. Please understand that classes can be cancelled due to weather conditions.)

Contact Sumita Town Tourism Association
TEL 0192-46-2111 (Calls in Japanese, please)
Address 88-1 Kawamukai, Setamai, Sumita Town, Kesen District, Iwate Prefecture 029-2396

Website <http://sumita-kankou.wix.com/sumita-kankou>

¥1,500/person

1.5~2 hours

June - October



Tools

Gold sluice

A tool that picks up heavy nuggets of gold and washes away dirt and sand.



Stamp mill

A piece of equipment that crushes gold ore for smelting.



Cupellation furnace

A tool used in the final process (cupellation method) to remove impure metals from the gold.

Former Gold Mining Sites of Kesen

Tamayama (Rikuzentakata)

The Tamayama Gold Mine, in Takekoma, Rikuzentakata, is at the western foot of Mount Hikami. Mt. Hikami, which looks like an upside-down bowl, was one of the Sendai domain's four biggest mining sites (the others were Yukisawa, Sakamotosawa (lazurite) and Imadeyama), and is said to have been a well-known, prosperous place. The first of the two most famous spots is the Sennin pit ruin, which is said to have been the main pit in Tamayama's prime and was dug vertically and horizontally underneath Tamayama Shrine. The second is the Waemon pit ruin, which was set up by a gold mining expert named Waemon Seto.

Tamayama was also the source of exceptionally transparent, high-quality crystals, which were said to be the equal of those used as prayer beads in Shosoin, Nara. For this reason, "tama" was used as local slang for "crystal".

Location Kamitsubo region, Takekoma, Rikuzentakata, Iwate

Website <http://www.tamayama-kinzan.com//>



Ore coated with Tamayama gold dust Photo: Tohkai Shimpō

Imadeyama (Ofunato)

Imadeyama Gold Mine is in Sanriku, Ofunato. Many pits were dug out here, dating from the Edo period to the modern era (until 1941), although most have unfortunately collapsed or been filled in. The mine was known for its high-quality, valuable ore. A lower-quality mine was dug out in the Showa era, which nevertheless provided reasonable results. The former mine site includes its terrace and waterways, as well as the open pit remains, waterwheel shed and huge piles of earth on the slopes next to the pits. It all remains as a window into the past.

Location Nishikamihorei region, Okirai, Sanriku, Ofunato, Iwate

KESEN LOCAL CUISINE



Tori-harami: Chicken Skirt Steak

Chicken skirt steak is a very valuable cut of meat which only amounts to about 10 grams from a young, Sumita-raised chicken.

The meat is fried without oil, and made in one of five ways: seasoned, onion salt, garlic, miso or chili. They're all tender and juicy!

There are 7 places in town with chicken skirt steak on their menu. Ask for "tori-harami."

☆ Further Information ☆

(Information is in Japanese)

- "Searching for the Three Golden Coast Gold Mines That Supported Hiraizumi Culture," a pamphlet by the Hiraizumi Tourism and Commerce Division.
- "The Location of Gold - Gold Mine Remains in the Kesen Region," by the Gold Mining Heritage Research Society.
- The Tamayama Gold Mine Remains Development Group's homepage: <http://www.tamayama-kinzan.com/>

Note from the editor

I hope these pages convey at least a part of Kesen's wonderful gold mining history. I'd like to use this space to express my gratitude to everyone who helped us with our reporting. Thank you very much.

The next issue is scheduled for late March.

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