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Tulips

Spring brings with it many things; nicer weather, green trees, and of course, flowers. And in Niigata, perhaps the most important flower is the tulip. Some people might not expect Niigata to be famous for its tulips, but Niigata produces more cut tulips than anywhere else in Japan. The tulip was first brought to Niigata in 1919, and its popularity boomed. By 1963, it was made the official prefecture flower. Tulips are mainly grown in the north of the prefecture, and listed below are a few of the more famous tulip gardens in Niigata.

Shinano River Yasuragi Embankment

Sakura and tulips line the embankment, creating a magical scene that perfectly embodies springtime. The path will also be illuminated from 6pm to 9pm until May 6th.

Address: Shinano River Yasuragi Embankment Area, Niigata City

Access: 15 minute walk from the JR Niigata station

Nagaike Ikoi-no-Mori Park

This park has some 800,000 tulips of 60 different varieties, spread over 20,000 square meters.

Address: Nagaike Ikoi-no-Mori Park, 3299-1 Tsuji, Tainai

Access: 10 minutes by car from the JR Nakajo station, 5 minutes by car from the Nakajo I.C.

Echigo Hillside Park

In addition to the park, there will also be a tulip festival, with classes in making crafts out of tulips. Admission is 410 yen for adults and 80 for elementary and middle school students.

Address: 1950-1, Mitsumata, Miyamotohigashikata-machi, Nagaoka

Access: Take the bus departing from platform 6 at the JR Nagaoka station.

Agano River Tokogatame Park

With the Agano River at the entrance of the park, visitors can enjoy tulips, and the view of the water, mountains, and sky.

Address: Soumi, Konan-ku, Niigata City

Access: 20 minute bus ride from the JR Niitsu station

Furusato Village



The Furusato Village was designed to show of the best of Niigata, so of course it makes sense they'd have tulips! Over 50,000 tulips are arranged in an artistic design in the garden area.

Address: 2307 Yamada, Nishi-ku, Niigata City

Access: From Niigata Station's Bandai Exit, take a bus headed for Shirone, Katahigashi, or Kiba from platform 12 and get off at *Furusato Mura*.

Sumoto

Gosen is particularly famous for tulips, and so the city created the Sumoto tulip area. With over one and half million tulips, Sumoto is a definite must-see.

Address: Ipponsugi area, Gosen

Access: 10 minutes by car from the JR Gosen station, or the Yasuda I.C.

Shiunjikenin Park

With over 140,000 tulips, you can enjoy spring to the fullest, and also have fun barbecuing, birdwatching, or swimming!

Address: 299 Fujitsukahama, Shibata

Access: 30 minute drive from the JR Shibata station, 30 minute drive from the Seiro Shibata I.C.

So Very Niigata: The Shinano River



At 367 kilometers, the Shinano River is the longest river in Japan, and has been a vital part of Niigata history and culture for hundreds of years. The river originates from Mount Kobushi, located in the border area of Yamanashi, Saitama, and Nagano, and then flows through Nagano Prefecture and Niigata before putting out into the ocean in Niigata City.

Back hundreds of years ago, before roads and rail became commonplace, the Shinano River played a huge role in the transportation of goods, especially during Japan's Edo Period. The river mainly functioned to transport the yearly rice tax, but was also used by merchants to move their wares, as during that period merchants were only allowed to move goods by water.

During these years, there were people called *funamichi* that worked to ship goods up and down the Shinano river; moving game and pelts upstream, fish taken from the sea downstream, and of course moving the taxes and rice for the feudal government. Chief among these groups was the Nagaoka Funamichi who monopolized all shipping between Nagaoka and Niigata City and directly led to the growth of Nagaoka as an economic hub. The Nagaoka Funamichi would move rice, tobacco, textiles, geta, and firewood to Niigata City, and then take salt, tea, fish, and matting to Nagaoka.

The Meiji period first saw a change over to propeller boats from the traditional Japanese boats that had been used, which allowed for much faster movement up and down the river. However by the time of the Taisho period, railines and highways were being developed which led to a steady decline in the river boating business. And in 1959, the last river shipping company closed its doors and brought an end to the long history of shipping on the river.

Today, the river flows on, much like it always has, and despite the fact the trade along it has died down, there are still many things happening in the Shinano. Over the years a number of dams have been built to help control the flow of water and prevent flooding, meaning that the river is much calmer now than in the past. And you can enjoy that calm river by taking a stroll on the Yasuragi embankment in Niigata City, riding one of the river ferries in the city, or going rafting in Tsunan, there's still plenty to enjoy on the Shinano River!



いただきます: Echigohime Strawberries

Niigata is renowned all over Japan for its high quality produce, and perhaps nothing represents that better than the Echigohime, the premier strawberry grown and sold right here in Niigata. First created in 1996 as a Niigata brand product, the strawberries take their name, Echigohime (literally, "a princess of Echigo") from the fact they are beautiful and fresh, just like a princess from the Echigo region (the historical name for Niigata). The strawberries themselves are quite large and soft compared to normal strawberries and have a very juicy and sweet flavor.

The long winter months in Niigata come with cold temperatures and little sunlight, meaning that these strawberries are harvested a long time after their flowers first bloom. This allows the berries to get rid of their acidity, and leaves with a solidly sweet flavor.

Echigohime are normally sold at supermarkets in Niigata from January to June, and will generally run about 1000 to 2000 yen. You can also try picking them yourself at one of the fruit gardens in Niigata.

-**Shirone Grape Garden:** <http://www.kudamonogari.com/>

-**Ikeda Tourist Orchard:** <http://www.budou-ichigo.com/index.html>



CIR Interview: Minh Ngoc Nguyen

Minh Ngoc Nguyen currently works as a Coordinator for International Relations at the Niigata Prefectural Office



Q) What brought you to Niigata?

The JET program! I applied for it and my job placement was in Niigata. I have been working here for 8 months so far.

Q) What was your first impression of Niigata and Japan? Has that impression changed?

I had studied in Osaka for 1 year between 2009 and 2010 so my impression of Japan was mostly what I remembered about Osaka where people were pretty friendly although sometimes I had no idea of the dialect they were speaking. It turned out that things are quite different between Osaka and Niigata and I do think they are uniquely interesting in their own way.

Besides that, I didn't know much of Niigata before I came but heard a lot about how harsh the winter would be. Luckily, Niigata City where I live didn't have that huge amount of snow and I'm glad that I successfully survived my first winter here.

Q) Did anything surprise you about life in Japan?

Living abroad, in general, never stops surprising you. Therefore, it's difficult to mention everything that has surprised me during my time in Japan so far. I have enjoyed figuring out every small surprise such as people distributing free tissues on the streets, how punctual the trains in Tokyo are or you can drink tap water in Kanto region but shouldn't do that in Kansai region because of the different water quality, etc..

Q) Do you have a favorite spot or thing to do in Niigata?

Yes! I love the shopping and entertainment complex in Bandai city. I also enjoy riding my bike along the cruise port near Toki Messe when the weather is nice. It's a great way to see the beautiful scenery there which reminds me of my hometown very much.

Q) Is there anything you really like about living in Niigata? And do you find anything difficult about living in Niigata?

It has to be the food. So far, Niigata has the best sushi I have ever had, especially its *のどごろ寿司*. Living here also allows me to taste various kinds of Japanese sake which I believe that many people including my dad are definitely jealous of.

On the other hand, I'm still struggling with the weather here. Winter has been lasting for almost 5 months in the city with the windiest days I have ever been through. Besides, I don't drive here so getting around sometimes is really difficult.

Q) Have you shared any aspects of your own culture with the people in Niigata?

I find myself lucky because I have had a lot of opportunities to share my own culture with the people in Niigata as a part of my job. I was surprised that people knew about Vietnam more than I expected and some did ask me really interesting questions that I had never thought of.

Q) What are your future plans?

I am going to stay in Japan for a few more years and if possible, do another job which is more related to my educational background of business administration. If I am good and lucky enough, I might be able to have my own business here... who knows.

Q) Do you have any advice for anyone else living in Japan?

It seems that most Japanese people are not really good at speaking foreign languages so speaking decent Japanese would help you a lot while living here. Therefore, I'd say you should learn the language and communicate with people around you as much as possible. Don't forget to travel around once in a while if you want to explore this beautiful country more!

Events Calendar

Tsugawa Fox Bride Procession

This is a magical festival which brings to life the traditions of Edo period marriages. Just as the sun is setting in the Western sky, the lights in town are turned off and torches and lanterns are used to create a bewitching atmosphere in town. At the center of it all is a new bride who has been transformed into a fox, and who along with her 108 attendants parades from Sumiyoshi Shrine to Kirinzan Park for the banquet. Guests can also get their faces painted to look like foxes!

Dates and Times: May 3 10:00-20:30 (Procession from 5:00pm to 8:30pm)

(Exact timing may change depending on the procession of the parade)

Location: Tsugawa, Aga

Access: 10 minutes by bus, or 35 minutes on foot from the JR Tsugawa Station. 5 minutes by car from the Tsugawa Interchange on the Banetsu Expressway

Fee: Fox face painting(From 10am to 5pm) Adults: ¥600 Kids: ¥300

Related site: Aga Homepage

<http://www.town.aga.niigata.jp/kankou/yomeiri/nagare/index.html>

(Japanese)



Tokamachi Kimono Festival

Tokamachi is well known for its beautiful kimonos, so why not come and see them, and even try one on, at the Tokamachi Kimono Festival. Held throughout the streets of Tokamachi, this festival has many opportunities for kimono lovers. For 5000 yen, you can rent a kimono, have the staff there dress you, enjoy a delicious lunch, and then walk around Tokamachi. There will also be a beauty contest, picture areas, a kimono parade, and of course, all kinds of food and drink stalls set up.

Dates and times: May 3, 11:00-15:00

Fee: Kimono Rental and dressing-5000 yen, Dressing fee- 3000 yen

Location: Honchoudoori, Ekidoori, Takadachoudoori in Tokamachi

Access: Immediately next to the JR Tokamachi Station. 30 minute drive from the Echigo Kawaguchi Interchange or the Muikamachi Interchange on the Kanetsu expressway.

Ojiya Bullfighting

Bullfighting in Ojiya is an old tradition, first recorded in the Edo period. Whereas Western bullfighting pits man-against-bull, here two bulls face off against each other and try to push and shove each other around. Unlike other forms of bullfighting, matches are normally stopped after each of bulls has had a chance to push forward or if it becomes a stalemate. This keeps any of the bulls from getting hurt, and serves to protect both the holy nature of the contest and the bulls desire to keep fighting.

Dates and times: May 3 and June 7, 12:00-15:00

Price: Normal seats: 1000 yen, Special seats: 2000 yen

Location: Koguriyama, Ojiya

Access: 15 minutes by car from the JR Ojiya Station (shuttle busses available)

Kashiwazaki Kaze no Jin

Held along the beach, this event will feature plenty of ways to enjoy to warm sun, from beach volleyball, to soccer, canoeing, kite flying, dance performances, and even a giant flea market. Come out to enjoy some great summer fun.

Dates and times: May 30 and 31

Location: Minatomachi Kaihin Park, 12 Nishiminato-cho, Kashiwazaki

Access: 20 minute walk from the JR Kashiwazaki Station, 15 minutes by car from the Kashiwazaki Interchange on the Hokuriku Expressway

Kyomachi Ondo Parade

Come and see a parade of dance troops performing traditional Aikawa Ondo dance on Kyomachi Street, which was once the main street connecting the Sado gold mine and the local lord's home. More and more dance troops participate every year!

Date and times: June 6 and 7, from 18:30 onwards

Location: Aikawa Kyomachi Doori (Sado Bugyosho), Sado

Access: 60 minutes by car from Ryotsu port, 30 minute walk from the Aikawa Bus stop.

Sanjo Kite Battle

In the old days of the Edo period, the children of the lords in Murakami would get together with the village children and have a kite battle. This tradition would gradually grow to become the Sanjo Kite Battle! The kites are all painted with fearsome pictures of samurai warriors, and each person tries to cut their opponent's kite's strings. Come out and see the dynamic battles for yourself, and enjoy a concert and even get a small kite for yourself.

Date and times: June 6 and 7 **Location:** Sanjo, Sougou Grounds

Access: 20 minute walk from the JR Kitasanjo Station, 5 minutes by car from the Sanjo Tsubame Interchange on the Hokuriku Expressway

Shirone Giant Kite Battle



At the Shirone Giant Kite Battle, teams set up on both sides of the Nakanokuchi River and raise their giant kites into the air to do battle. The kites, some of which can be as big as 40m², are covered with fearsome paintings of samurai or other intimidating things, and fly through the air as the teams try to cut each other's ropes. The tradition began when the people of Shirone flew a giant kite sent given by the local daimyo to celebrate completing a dyke on the Nakanokuchi River. However the kite fell in the nearby Nishishirone, damaging some crops and houses. In retaliation, Nishishirone raised its own kite and brought it crashing down on the Shirone side.

Though passions have cooled a little since then, it's still an amazing spectacle.

Date and times: June 4 to June 8

Location: Shirone·Nishishirone, Minami-ku, Niigata City

Access: 30 minute car ride from the JR Tsubame-Sanjo Station, 30 minute car ride from the Sanjo-Tsubame Interchange on the Hokuriku Expressway, 15 minute car ride from the Makikatahigashi Interchange on the Hokuriku expressway

Maki Summer Festival

Held in conjunction with the Maki Shrine festival, the Maki Summer Festival is the first summer festival of the year. The festival will have traditional dances, a procession of portable shrines, a parade of traditional Japanese floats, and even fireworks on Saturday, June 15th. Though there will be a number of other summer festivals later in the year, this will be your first chance to really enjoy that summer spirit!

Date and times: June 12 to June 14 **Location:** Maki, Nishikan-ku, Niigata City

Access: Immediately next to JR Maki Station, 10 minutes by car from the Makikatahigashi Interchange on the Hokuriku Expressway.

Kanbara Festival

One of the three biggest festivals in the prefecture, the Kanbara Festival is the perfect "Niigata" festival. Nearly 400 stalls will be set up in the area around Kanbara shrine, and you can even get your hands on some of Niigata's famous Poppoyaki snacks! There will also be shooting games, ghost stories, and a haunted house.

Date and times: June 30 to July 2 **Location:** 3-18 Nagaminemachi, Chuou-ku, Niigata City

Access: 15 minute walk from the Bandai exit of the JR Niigata Station. 20 minutes by car from either the Niigatanishi Interchange on the Hokuriku Expressway, or the Niigata Chuou Interchange on the Banetsu Expressway.

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