

The Gentleness and Toughness of Osatsu's Ama Divers

Ama, the female divers who plunge into the sea to harvest abalones, turban shells, and other shellfish, without any diving equipment and relying on nothing but their own skills, are a rarity in the world; they can be seen only in Japan and South Korea. Partly because of NHK's popular drama serial *Ama-chan*, ama divers are attracting a lot of attention once again. The realities of the ama world are tough, though. The number of abalones that can be sold for high prices is declining, and since there are not many young people who are attracted to the occupation, ama divers are getting older and fewer. There are now only about 2,000 ama divers, one-tenth as many as there were in the "golden era" of the 1940s.

Against this background, I asked Sumiko Nakagawa, her daughter Sanae, and her granddaughter Shizuka, a three-generation ama family living in the town of Osatsu in Toba City, Mie Prefecture, about the attractions and rewards of ama diving.

During my trip to Osatsu, among other places, I also visited an ama hut for tourists, where you can eat freshly cooked seafood while listening to the tales of active ama divers, and Ishigami-san, a small shrine on the approach to Shinmei Shrine where it is said that if a woman make a single wish, it will come true.



(From left) Sanae, Sumiko, and Shizuka

The Fun of Ama Diving

Most of the fishermen and ama divers in Osatsu are also engaged in other occupations, such as fishing businesses, farming, or *minshuku* guesthouses. While plying their trade as ama divers, the three-generation Nakagawa family also runs the Nakagawa guesthouse.

“When I was young, diving was real fun,” recalls Sumiko, 74, a charismatic ama who has been following this path for 58 years, having first dived at the age of 16. “I would dive to the bottom of the sea with my friends, six or seven of us, fill the net with abalones and turban shells, and come back on land. Then we would go to a hut with a stove, warm ourselves, and chat together. It was so carefree. These days there are not so many abalones, but diving is still great fun.” Sumiko continues to dive to this day because diving is such a pleasure and also because of her beloved granddaughter, Shizuka.

The Delight of Guests

“We serve the abalones, turban shells, and other shellfish we have caught to the guests staying at our *minshuku*,” says Sanae, 41, who is so youthful-looking she and her daughter Shizuka are often mistaken as sisters. “Everyone remarks how tasty they are and eats so heartily. It is moments like that when I feel really glad we got into diving and operate the guesthouse.” At first, after her marriage, Sanae was only engaged in running the guesthouse, but six years later she became an ama diver because she wanted to serve shellfish she had caught herself to guests. “I learned ama diving by myself,” she says. “A lot depends on experience and sense. Once I harvested 50 kg of turban shells in a single day! That’s probably my best memory as an ama diver. I want Shizuka to enjoy diving as well.” Sanae’s eyes sparkle with the pride of an ama diver, the softness of a young guesthouse proprietress, and the gentleness of a mother.



Love of Osatsu and Family

“When I was in the first grade of senior high school,” begins Shizuka, 22, who is now a student at Kogakkan University, “the actor Tomio Umezawa often talked about advertising the ama profession through high-school ama, but at that time I had no thoughts about becoming an ama diver at all. It was in the third grade of senior high school, in the winter when my admission to university was finalized, that I made the decision to become an ama diver.” Shizuka is a typical young woman. She likes going to karaoke with friends and is a fan of the singer Kumi Koda and the model Rola.

there is a stove in the center of the huts, local people call them *kamado* (stove). They are places of communication where ama divers chat among themselves about fishing, family matters, and other gossip while eating the small fish they have caught or the lunchboxes they bring with them.

Osatsu Kamado is a popular ama hut for tourists where visitors can get a taste of the attractions of ama culture. Enjoying freshly cooked abalones and turban shells while listening to the banter of active ama divers really is something special.

The value of ama culture is gaining recognition overseas as well; the *Michelin Green Guide Japan* gives a one-star status to the *amagoya*.



Osatsu Kamado (Maenohama)



Visitors can chat with ama divers while enjoying abalones, turban shells, and other seafood.

Osatsu Kamado

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Shinmei Shrine and Ishigami-San

One place that has become especially popular among young women recently is Ishigami-san, a small shrine on the approach to Shinmei Shrine dedicated to Tamayorihime no Mikoto, the mythical goddess of the sea. At this so-called power spot, it is said that one wish of a woman will be granted. Ama divers have worshipped here for ages.

Beyond Ishigami-san, the main hall of Shinmei Shrine comes into view. This is a sacred place where ama divers pray for safety.

Tel.: 0599-33-6873



Ishigami-san



The main hall of Shinmei Shrine

Seiman, Doman

Ama divers carry good-luck charms with them when they go diving in order to ward off evil spirits. Since it can be drawn in one go, with the pen returning to the starting point, the star-like *seiman* mark symbolizes a safe return from the sea. The grid-like *doman* mark, meanwhile, appears to have no entrance and no exit, so symbolically it is difficult for evil spirits to get in. These designs are also seen on the amulets of Ishigami-san and are printed on handkerchiefs, phone straps, and other goods.



The *seiman* and *doman* designs

Ama House Gozaya (Old Private House)

The retro Gozaya shop, also located on the approach to Shinmei Shrine, is a renovated private dwelling built 80 years ago. The 1st floor shop sells goods with the *seiman* and *doman* designs, as well as special products of Toba and Osatsu. The 2nd floor café, which is especially popular among women, serves homemade *tokoroten* (seaweed jelly noodles) sprinkled with soy flour.

Tel.: 0599-33-6770



The Gozaya shop and café

Osatsu Ama Culture Museum

At the Osatsu Ama Culture Museum there is an ama diver diorama, a display of fishing equipment and other objects, and an introduction to the history of Osatsu. The car park and bicycle service are both free of charge, so this museum is also a good base and

starting point for a tour of the town.

Tel.: 0599-33-7453



Diorama of an ama diver