

An Encounter with the Most Delicious Fish in Itoigawa

I fancied some tasty, fresh fish. I was looking for a place with a fish market too, and if that fish market had an auction, all the better. So I headed for the city of Itoigawa in Niigata Prefecture, which, thanks to the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen bullet train line, is now only a couple of hours away from Tokyo.

As well as the fish market, Itoigawa is famous for its jade, a semitransparent gemstone with a mysterious color and sparkle; its spectacular topography including the Fossa Magna rift zone (a large trench created when the Japanese archipelago was formed); and the wonders of nature. As I was strolling through the city, I suddenly came across a really nostalgic retro shopping arcade.



Hakubasanroku Prefectural Natural Park (Legend has it that Takanami Pond, in the center of the photo, is inhabited by a giant fish.)

Shopping Arcade on Former Kaga Kaido Reminiscent of Edo Period

Leaving Itoigawa Station on the Sea of Japan side and walking toward the coast, after a couple of blocks I came to a genuinely Japanese-style shopping arcade built with timber. The shops in the arcade, called Gangi Street, have long hanging eaves typical of snowy regions; hence the name *gangi*, which means “covered alley.” Even after a heavy

snowfall, people are able to walk to and fro under the eaves and do their shopping. The timber adds a feeling of warmth to the arcade.



Covered shopping arcade Kyoya

One store that stands out in the arcade is the lattice-style Kyoya, which, as well as handling items for ceremonial occasions, such as betrothal gifts and Japanese candles, has been diligently making a traditional confectionery called *yubeshi* (a steamed citrus-flavored rice-cake sweet wrapped in a bamboo sheath) for more than 350 years.

In the Edo period (1603–1868) Itoigawa was an important transportation junction on the way to Edo (present-day Tokyo). When a daimyo of the Maeda clan, which ruled the Kaga domain (in the present-day Ishikawa and Toyama prefectures), was on his way to do his obligatory stint in Edo, he took some *yubeshi* along as a gift for the Tokugawa shogun. The shogun was so delighted by the sweets that the Maeda daimyo gave his seal of approval by permitting them to use the term *onyubeshi* (meaning something like “purveyors to the shogun”). Under the motto of “Business might change, but *yubeshi* lives on,” the Kyoya store has continued making the product to this day. Try some. They’re superb.



Kyoya's *yubeshi*, a 350-year-old delicacy

The Maeda lords lodged at the Kaganoi Sake Brewery, which also boasts a history of more than 350 years. Said to be the oldest sake brewery in Niigata Prefecture, Kaganoi was given its name by a Maeda lord. There are some valuable documents stored in the library, which was donated by the Maeda family, and priceless gifts displayed in the exhibit corner too. If you make a booking beforehand, you can also visit the brewery.



Kaganoi Sake Brewery

Get Rich Quick with Jade

After strolling along the covered shopping arcade, I headed for the Itoigawa coast. Since Itoigawa is the leading jade producing region in Japan, the roads were lined with jade stones and various types of rock objects dating from several hundred million years ago.



Jade rock



Serpentinite

I had heard that many so-called jade hunters visited the Itoigawa coast, commonly known as “Jade Coast,” picking up stones that are washed onto the beach in the hope of getting rich quick. Apparently a natural jade stone can be sold for a high price.

So I joined the other “jade hunters” and combed the beach looking for jade. After picking up several stones that I thought might be so, I took them to the Fossa Magna Museum and showed them to a curator-cum-appraiser there.

Unfortunately my stones were not jade but almost entirely serpentinite metamorphic rocks, which are formed when rocks and stones lying deep underground undergo intense heat or pressure. The clue to spotting jade, I was told, is to look for white, square, and heavy stones with a smooth and glittering surface.



The Itoigawa coast, commonly known as “Jade Coast”

Ages Ago Mount Fuji Lay at the Bottom of the Sea

Since I had become very interested in jade and the topography of this region, I had a look around the Fossa Magna Museum. As well as jade and the Fossa Magna, the museum introduces fossils, minerals, and natural disasters, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. In the Fossa Magna Theater, a huge wall screen and floor monitor explain the birth of the Japanese archipelago and origin of the Fossa Magna. It was extremely interesting and impressive. In particular, I was amazed to learn that in the distant past the island of Honshu was divided into two parts, and the area now including Mount Fuji, Hakone, and the Japan Alps lay at the bottom of the sea.



Fossa Magna Theater

Lively Afternoon Fish Market Auction

If you go to Itoigawa, one place that you really must visit is the fish market. Actually, there are two fish markets that open not in the early morning but in the afternoon, Nou Fishing Port Market and Itoigawa Fishing Port Market. The daytime opening times make it very easy to schedule a visit.



The Itoigawa Fishing Port Market opens at 1:30 p.m.

I went to the Itoigawa Fishing Port Market, where the auction begins at 1:30 p.m. When I arrived 15 minutes before the auction, many types of fresh seafood that had just been caught were lined up side by side and were being evaluated by buyers from sushi eateries, restaurants, fishmongers, and the like. When the auction started, words that are quite incomprehensible to ordinary folk like me flew around the room. As soon as they had completed a deal, the buyers would load the seafood onto their trucks.



Lots of different species of just-caught fresh seafood Crabs still stretching their legs

Mr. Kota Ii, a fisherman and owner of an *izakaya* called Okesa, invited me to visit his pub that evening. “I’ll serve you one of these crabs for dinner,” he said. Since I love crabs, I immediately accepted his invitation.



The boisterous Itoigawa fish market auction

Just-Caught Fresh Seafood for Dinner

Since Mr. Ii also goes out fishing himself, the food at Okesa, a skewer restaurant, is guaranteed to be fresh and tasty. There are various items on the menu, including sashimi assortments and skewered meat and vegetables, but what really made me smack my lips was the mildly sweet red snow crab. The English menu has photos as well, so foreigners need have no qualms about eating there. If you visit Itoigawa, by all means savor the city’s fresh, delicious seafood.



Assortment of fresh sashimi



A batch of red snow crabs

Cooperation: Junior Chamber International Itoigawa

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