

## Warm Hospitality, Japanese Style Part 9

### Warm Hospitality with Blue Eyes

#### Kamesei Ryokan in the Onsen Town of Togura-Kamiyamada, Nagano Prefecture

An American-born man, who took over a *ryokan* (Japanese inn), today serves his guests and strives to invigorate the *onsen* town in the central part of Nagano prefecture. In this issue, *IHCSA Café* introduces the warm hospitality of the family-run 12-room *ryokan*, mainly operated by him and his wife, and his efforts to improve the charm of the area.

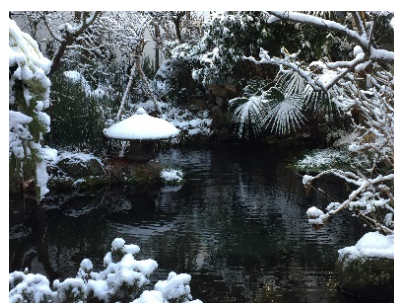


#### As a Young Master of a *Ryokan*

Mr. Tyler Lynch was working for a trading company in Seattle on the U.S. West Coast and living with his Japanese wife. Around that time, *Kamesei Ryokan*, with 100-year-old buildings, run by his wife's family, was on the brink of going under. Tyler loved the *ryokan*'s atmosphere very much, but he found out that the buildings would be demolished because the family had no successors. Such old, historically valuable wooden buildings can never be rebuilt once they are pulled down. Tyler found his mission to keep the *ryokan* alive.



In 2005, Tyler began working at the *ryokan* while he was still unsure about the procedures. Everything needs to be done mainly by the family members. His first task was to lay out and fold up futons for guests. Even today, bed-making is part of his daily routine, and he does this job while wearing *samue*, Japanese traditional work clothes. The *ryokan* used to have only an indoor public bath. However, because of his strong desire to make guests feel more relaxed, Tyler learned how to use construction tools and created three new open-air baths. He also provided distinctive small gardens made differently in each guest room on the first floor. He renovates the facilities as much as he can.



*Kamesei Ryokan*, where Tyler has diligently worked over 10 years, welcomes guests with a nostalgic atmosphere. The *ryokan* is complex in structure in a traditional way, having semi-

detached guest rooms located across the connecting corridor. There is also a leafy courtyard surrounding the pond, where carps swim, and the courtyard is covered with powder snow in winter. Local old furnishings are neatly arranged in the facilities, giving guests a sense of peace away from busy days. The face-to-face hospitality of Tyler and his wife makes guests feel at home and attracts many people. This *ryokan* provides an opportunity, especially for foreign visitors, to experience the old-style and impressive Japanese culture.

Hot springs at *Kamesei Ryokan* are supplied directly from the abundant hot spring sources. There are 14 hot spring sources around the *onsen* town. The fresh hot spring water is blended to maintain the same water temperature throughout the year, and no extra water is added. The spring quality is alkaline simple sulfur (pH 8.6); it has smooth texture and is very gentle to the skin. For these reasons, the hot springs are famous as “beautifying waters,” attracting many *onsen* lovers.

Tyler always tries to provide a “Nagano-style *ryokan*.” For example, he installed a locally made old firewood stoves that give gentle warmth to let guests enjoy the time and space in the local style. “I wish to satisfy the expectations of Japanese and foreign guests who are interested in Nagano and want to stay at a *ryokan* there. I want to provide opportunities for more people to find the charm of Nagano,” says Tyler. His challenge will continue.



### **Kamesei Ryokan-Style Hospitality**

*Kamesei Ryokan* offers its guests Seattle-style original cookies instead of ready-made sweets. “We Western people have DNA to hand-make what we need,” Tyler says. “I think the combination of local originality, a handmade feeling, and the hospitality of blue eyes makes our *ryokan* attractive.”

According to Tyler, hospitality can be defined simply as providing what guests want. He always keeps two points in mind. The first is to have a chat with guests when he leads them to their room and offers them a cup of green tea, in order to ascertain what they want. Indeed, walking maps are not placed on the reception counter. When guests seem to want to go out, he asks them, “Would you like to take a walk? Do you need clip-clop sandals (*geta* or wooden sandals)?” Then, not simply handing them a map, he offers travel tips using the map, such as the *ryokan*’s location, information on shops, and directions to footbaths. He carefully observes their reactions and finds out what they really want, so that he can provide the best advice. The





second point is to serve guests as much as possible, even if it takes time, such as helping make their tour plan and guiding them to where they want to go.

Unlike Japanese people, foreign tourists often have trouble researching tourist sites and activities available around their lodging. Tyler then shows them guidebooks and explains the local stories. From the viewpoint of foreign tourists, he also takes them to restaurants according to their food preferences and even helps them schedule a tour plan based on their desired destinations. On top of that, he created English leaflets, which show public transportation to major tourist spots in Nagano, and generously distributes them to lodging facilities in the area for the sake of foreign visitors to the *onsen* town.



### Hot Spring Resort Area in the Onsen Town Togura-Kamiyamada

After its opening around 120 years ago, the hot spring resort area in the *onsen* town attracted many visitors from around the country to the Zenkoji temple in Nagano City as a place to celebrate the end of their pilgrimage, and *onsen* culture flourished there. In addition to the popular hot springs, the Chikuma River (called the Shinano River downstream), which is the longest in Japan, and the mountainous and harvest scenery here have remained unchanged for many years. There are about 30 lodging facilities in the *onsen* town, whose size is good for walks and where you can enjoy walking through a maze of smooth paths in a *yukata* (a casual summer *kimono*) with *geta* (wooden sandals).



**Panoramic view of the Onsen  
Town Togura-Kamiyamada**



**Oshibori-udon noodles**



**Oyaki dumplings**

The *onsen* town also has many privately run restaurants, bars, and specialty stores where you can enjoy local foods of Nagano, as well as footbaths and shooting galleries. “Tourists want to see local life and feel no attraction to standardized chain stores.” This is what most community residents here think, and the common vision allows tourists to travel back in time to the good old days of the Showa era.

In addition to sweets made from well-known local apricots, *oshibori-udon* noodles are also a famous specialty food recommended by local people. When eaten, the noodle is dipped in the juice of a local grated radish, which is extremely spicy. The pungent taste will give visitors a strong impression. Stores serving hot, fresh *oyaki* dumplings (a local food in the Shinshu region) that are baked after they are ordered are also popular. The woman who owns a *yakitori*

(skewered grilled chicken) restaurant does not speak any foreign languages, but she always tries to entertain foreign customers by communicating with them using gestures. As for a *geisha* show, which is a rare experience for foreign people, Tyler negotiated with the *geisha* guild to reduce the show length, so that tourists can enjoy it at an affordable price.



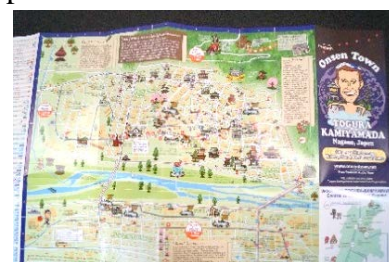
## Let Many People Find the Natural Local Charm

Tyler joins the practice of *kagura-shishimai* (Shinto music and dancing and lion dance) for the summer festival, the largest event in the town, where he plays the bamboo flute. If there are foreign guests who are interested in the tradition, he takes them to the practice with him. Guests who have had the opportunity are very happy with listening to Japanese traditional musical instruments, enjoying the lion dance, and interacting with local *kagura* members.



Tyler wearing an *okame* mask

Tyler created an English walking map to encourage foreign tourists to become more interested in the *onsen* town ([www.onsentown.net](http://www.onsentown.net)). Developing the components and texts of the walking map, he also played a leading role in raising money from stores listed on the map and applying to the prefectural government for a subsidy. On the map, ATMs, free Wi-Fi spots, and other public services in high demand by foreign visitors are represented by easily recognizable icons. It also includes the contents and prices of popular menus for each store and restaurant, as well as tourist activities that welcome foreign people, such as apple- and grape-picking farms. Information on hospitals and pharmacies is included as well. Moreover, details of major sightseeing spots are linked with a podcast to provide voice navigation. In this way, his original walking map has very creative contents that assist foreign visitors in enjoying their trip.



Because there are no tour guides in the *onsen* town and surrounding areas, Tyler started town guide services called Zukudashi Eco Tours (<http://www.zukudashi.com/>). In the Walking Tours program, for example, participants taste foods and enjoy activities at specialty stores, and also learn about the town, including little-known stories of culture, history, and lifestyle in the area. In the Cycling Tours program, on the other hand, participants travel village forests by bicycle



while learning local stories, and they can even experience harvest work during harvest season. Tyler is striving to have visitors fully enjoy not only the hot springs but also the fantastic local attractions to make their trip satisfying and memorable.



Tyler has actively created opportunities to revitalize both his *ryokan* and the community, for example, by organizing local events and serving as a member of the tourism committee. He is also working as a blogger to transmit tourist information in English on the tourism website run by the Nagano prefectural government, while establishing and representing an NPO “Ninja Project” to promote Nagano’s tourism activities at the private level. He was awarded a prize by the prefectural governor for his tremendous efforts.



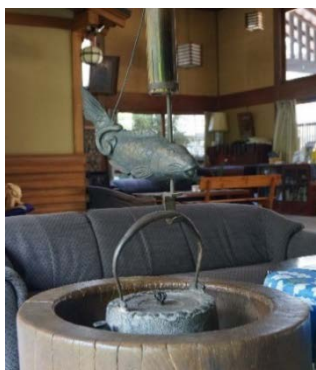
“I strongly believe that the Onsen Town Togura-Kamiyamada is the best hot spring resort area in Japan. So, I want to improve the quality and make the town more popular. To do so, I think everyone here should rediscover the values of the town and be proud of their jobs. I want to cooperate with community people in this town so that we can give our visitors the greatest pleasure,” says Tyler, who envisions next actions and works hard for tourists with a stirring love for the *onsen* town.

Interview and photo credit: **Kamesei Ryokan**, Onsen Town Togura-Kamiyamada  
<http://www.kamesei.jp/>

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<http://chikuma-kanko.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/english.pdf>



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