

GRAND CANYONING TWO HOURS FROM TOKYO



“Woahhhh!”

Tossed about by a rapid current, the inflatable raft pitches violently up and down, and a whoop of delight goes up from the participants.

Whitewater rafting on inflatable rafts is popular on the Tone-gawa river, which flows through Minakami-machi in Gunma Prefecture, about a two-hour drive from Tokyo.

“When the Tone-gawa swells with snowmelt, its rapid currents are world-class,” says New Zealander Mike Harris, who runs an outdoor sports company in

Minakami-machi. “Minakami had always been crowded with skiers in the winter, but there weren’t many visitors during the rest of the year. So I started up rafting as an activity that could be enjoyed in spring and summer too.”

Harris learned Japanese at senior high school and university in New Zealand, coming to Japan for the first time in 1992 as an exchange student. After graduating from university in New Zealand, his love of outdoor sports led him to work at a ski resort in Nagano Prefecture. When he visited Minakami-machi



An inflatable raft pitches violently up and down in the Tone-gawa river.

BOTH PHOTOS MASATOSHI SAKAMOTO

in 1995 and saw the Tone-gawa rapids, Harris was convinced that the rafting that was popular on the rivers of his native country, New Zealand, could also be enjoyed here. There and then he resolved to move to Minakami-machi and, together with a friend, set up an outdoor sports company that conducts rafting and canyoning tours—making your way down a river via natural waterslides and jumps in gorges. Until then, Japanese people had not been very familiar with rafting and canyoning, but the idea that these were fun activities soon spread by word of



Mike Harris (center) shares a laugh with raft riders before heading down the river.

mouth or via the Internet. The town's proximity to Tokyo and the novelty value of a foreigner-run operation drew the attention of the media, and people flocked to take part.

The founding of Harris's company was followed by a string of other outdoor sports companies setting up in Minakami-machi. Now there are nearly a dozen. The tours offered by these companies offer not only rafting and canyoning, but canoeing, mountain biking, bungee jumping, and every conceivable kind of outdoor sport, from spring through to fall.

Harris's company employs staff of various nationalities, including Australians, Brazilians and Americans. As a result, 20 percent of the tour participants in spring and summer are foreign tourists from Asia or Europe and North America, while in winter foreign tourists and students from international schools account for 80 percent.

"Since the earthquake, the number of participants has unfortunately fallen off, but Japan is really safe, so I think that by winter at the latest the number of participants will get back to normal," says Harris. "Minakami-machi has mountains, virgin forest, rivers and lakes, all the conditions needed to enjoy outdoor pursuits. It is also close to Tokyo, and is a perfect place to spend the summer, so I would like to see lots of people coming here!"

