

WALK INTO THE MOVIES



Local volunteers put on a sword-fight show at Shonai Eigamura.

Shonai Eigamura (Shonai Movie Village) is a sightseeing spot located in Yamagata Prefecture in the Tohoku area, facing the Sea of Japan. It was established with help from local people with the aim of making Shonai the Japanese version of Hollywood. Shonai Eigamura has a large open set and a museum, and attracts more than 100,000 visitors annually, including sightseers from Asian nations. Toshio Matsubara reports.

Eigamura Co. "If you have seats on the hill of the farming village, you can have a theatrical

Drive for about 30 minutes from the urban area of Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture, and you will see the 88-hectare open set of Shonai Eigamura located in the great intermountain outdoors. It is surrounded by forest and, on sunny days, commands a good view of Mt. Gassan with a farming village, a fishing village and a post station of the Edo period (1603–1867) reproduced inside. "I consider this vast site to be a stage," says Masaaki Ujo, president of Shonai

show with the great outdoors in the background. We will attract sightseers in this way in an effort to revitalize the Shonai area."

Yamagata Prefecture is strongly associated with the movies: numerous period movies have been shot in this area, and the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival has been held here since 1989. Shonai Eigamura Co., the operator of the open set of Shonai Eigamura, was established in 2006 with the

Access and Admission

Access: From Shonai Airport, it takes around 30 minutes to the museum and around 40 minutes to the open set. A shuttle bus carries visitors to the museum and the open set from JR Tsuruoka Station for 2,000 yen, on Saturdays, Sundays and national holidays.

Admission:

Shonai Eigamura open set: 1,600 yen (adults), 1,300 yen (junior high and high school students) and 1,000 yen (elementary school students)

Shonai Eigamura Museum: 500 yen (adults; junior high school students and older), free (elementary school students and younger). Visitors to the open set receive a 250-yen discount.

Holidays: The open set is open throughout the period from mid-April to late November. It will be closed from November 23, 2011 to mid-April of 2012. Shonai Eigamura Museum will be closed from December 16, 2011 to March 15, 2012.

aim of supporting the production of movies located in the Shonai area. Shonai Eigamura helped find locations for film shoots and arranged extras. Since then, the company has been involved in the production of numerous movies. It attracted a lot of attention when the 2008 film *Departure* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film at the 81st Oscars having supported the production of the film. In 2009, a large open set which was used for shooting period movies was opened to the public, and the company began running it as a theme park.

At the open set, visitors can enjoy a swordfight show performed by local volunteers in samurai outfits. Visitors can also learn how to sword fight, watch puppet plays and folk tales related to Shonai, and borrow kimono free of charge.

One of the characteristics of Shonai Eigamura is the participation of the local people as the staff and extras on the open set. More than 2,500 people have registered as movie extras, while fifty volunteers work as interpreters for foreign visitors. Shonai Eigamura and local people are thus bound by strong ties.

Shonai Eigamura has already helped to make a total of ten theatrical films. From September to October of this year, twenty-three children in the sixth year at elementary school made a drama about emotional ties and four documentary films at Shonai

Eigamura, all by themselves. Minamisanriku in Miyagi Prefecture, the hometown of these children, was badly stricken in the Great East Japan Earthquake. On October 10, these works were shown at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, where they were warmly received by the audience.

"We plan to add around 1,000 seats to the site of the open set and perform a large-scale martial arts show next year," says Ujo. "Our efforts to make everyone happy and enrich the entire community are built around movies. This is what we envision." 

Toshio Matsubara is a freelance writer.



Visitors dress up in period-look kimono at Shonai Eigamura.

BOTH PHOTOS MASATOSHI SAKAMOTO