

Let It Snow

Despite the unusually heavy snow, people in their thousands filed through Ouchijuku's main street for this year's Snow Festival.

ALL PHOTOS TADASHI AIZAWA

The Ouchijuku Snow Festival is held in February in Minamiaizu-gun, Fukushima Prefecture. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji attended this year's festival and shares this report.

Fukushima Prefecture is broadly divided from east to west into the three regions of Hama-dori in the coastal region, Naka-dori, which is sandwiched between the coastal region and the inland region, and Aizu in the mountain region. The town of Ouchijuku in Minamiaizu-gun in Aizu consists of thirty or so traditional thatched buildings lining a street of approximately 500 meters. Surrounded by mountains, Ouchijuku was established as a post station in 1640.

The 1970s saw a reduction in the number of thatched roofed houses, which were time-consuming

to maintain. In the 1980s, however, there was a movement by residents and scholars for the conservation of the townscape, and a residents' charter was drawn up stating that the buildings could not be sold, rented out, or knocked down. In due course, the townscape came to be highly regarded, and today it is a tourist spot attracting 1.2 million visitors a year, including overseas visitors mainly from other Asian countries such as China and South Korea.

At the present time, Ouchijuku has a *soba* (noodle) restaurant that serves the local specialty, a gift shop selling traditional craft products, a guesthouse where

visitors can experience life as it would have been when the town was a post station, and so forth.

On February 11 and 12, in snow more than 1 meter deep, tourists thronged to the Snow Festival for the annual festival now in its twenty-sixth year. The varied program of events included traditional dancing, tug of war in the snow, and a soba speed-



A taiko performance at the Ouchijuku Snow Festival

eating contest. At night, candles burned in snow lanterns and fireworks were set off in the night sky.

"We have always been interested in Ouchijuku with its surviving old streetscape. We had no qualms whatsoever about the effects of the Great East Japan Earthquake," say a couple from Tokyo in their twenties visiting Ouchijuku for the first time. "The Snow Festival is really good as it feels like something 'hand-made' by the local people. I was quite surprised by how much snow there is, but the snow-covered streetscape is so lovely."

"We had been worried that we would lose custom

Access

Ouchijuku is 3.5 hours away from Tokyo. From Tokyo Station, take the Tohoku Shinkansen to Koriyama Station, then change to the JR Banetsusai Line. At Aizuwakamatsu Station change to the Aizu Line, and alight at Yunokami Onsen. Ouchijuku takes ten minutes by car from the station.

as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake, but we are really pleased that we are still getting lots of visitors as usual," says a man from the Snow Festival executive committee. "We hope that people will also come to the Hange Festival in July, when the autumn colors are spectacular."



Beautiful fireworks light up the Ouchijuku night sky