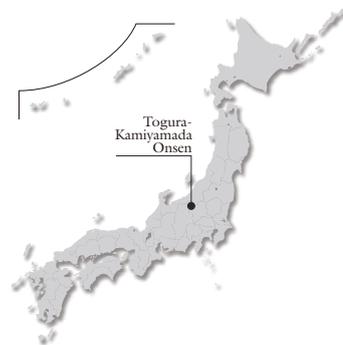


American Innkeeper Preserving a Traditional Inn



*Established in 1955, Kamesei Ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn located in the hot spring resort of Togura-Kamiyamada Onsen in Chikuma, Nagano Prefecture. The inn is run today by an American, **Tyler Lynch**, and his Japanese wife, Mari. Masaki Yamada asked Tyler what brought him here.*

Born and raised in the American west coast port city of Seattle, Tyler Lynch first became interested in Japan some twenty-five years ago. A high school student in those days, he worked part time for a Japanese trading company, checking ships' cargo and filing documents.

"I decided that I wanted to work for a major Japanese trading company in the future. So from that point onwards I started to study Japanese. Back then however, I only really saw Japan as a business opportunity. I wasn't especially interested in Japanese traditions or culture," recalls Tyler.

Having previously studied in Japan as a foreign student, Tyler came over to Japan for the

fourth time after graduating from university. During his stay, he went to a Japanese hot spring inn and met his future wife, Mari, two encounters that would change his life.

"I wanted to keep on studying Japanese after university, so I decided to stay on in Japan. I was teaching at a language school in Ueda, Nagano Prefecture, when I met Mari, who was one of the school's students. It turned out that her family owned Kamesei Ryokan. Once we started dating, I gradually found myself being drawn to the inn's traditions and old-style charm."

In 1995, Tyler and Mari married and went to live in Seattle. Despite moving back home and getting a job with a local trading company, a part of Tyler's heart was forever in Japan, at Kamesei Ryokan. Then one day, fate intervened.

The couple had been living in Seattle for eleven years when Mari's father, and the owner of Kamesei Ryokan, passed away, leaving her mother Junko to manage the inn on her own. With no successor to take over the reins, there was even talk of demolishing the inn to make way for a car park. On hearing this, Tyler made a life changing decision.

"I knew that we had to keep Kamesei Ryokan going, even if only to help preserve Japan's ancient hot spring culture. I figured, if there's no successor to take over the business, then I'll do it myself. I thought it would be rewarding to bring up our children in a beautiful rural environment too."



Tyler Lynch with his wife, Mari, and her mother in front of Kamesei Ryokan

So Tyler became the successor to Kamesei Ryokan.

Having traveled extensively around Asia, Europe and other parts of the world, he insists that Japanese hot spring inns have a unique appeal that is unlike anything other countries have to offer.

“Japanese hot spring inns are more than just facilities that provide accommodation. Put simply, they offer total relaxation. You can have a leisurely soak in a hot spring, enjoy food made from the best local ingredients, and just sit back and relax on the *tatami* mats in a traditional Japanese room. It gives you the precious time you need to unwind from all the stresses of your day-to-day life.”

Tyler also has strong views about the architecture of Japanese inns.

“When the Japanese economy was booming during the bubble years, most of the old wooden inns in the Togura-Kamiyamada Onsen area were torn down and replaced with concrete hotels. Personally, I prefer to retain the warmth that you get with old wooden buildings. I think we should be protecting all the old customs you get with hot spring inns, such as the connecting corridors and the lush inner gardens. If you come to stay at Kamesei Ryokan, you can completely immerse yourself in traditional Japanese culture. Our overseas guests love things like the *tatami* rooms and *yukata* gowns.”

His determination goes beyond merely preserving the old. He has installed a wood burning stove in the lobby, put traditional folk handicrafts in guests’ rooms and even built his open outdoors *rotenburo* bath.

As well as working assiduously at the inn, Tyler is also committed to attracting visitors to



Tyler Lynch checks the water temperature of the 2 x 1.5 meter *rotenburo* bath, which Tyler built himself

the area and Nagano Prefecture as a whole. The Nagano Inbound Summit, an event thought up by Tyler himself, took place in the city of Matsumoto in 2008. Around 100 foreign citizens living in the prefecture and representatives from the tourist industry attended the event and discussed issues such as public and private sector initiatives to attract more foreign visitors. Having since been appointed as one of the prefecture’s official bloggers and a Nagano Inbound Ambassador, Tyler has launched an English blog promoting landmarks, hot springs and other tourist destinations around Nagano Prefecture.

Every year, roughly 6,000 guests come to stay at Kamesei Ryokan. Around 10% of that total is made up of foreign tourists.

“We get a lot of Australian guests who have come to Nagano to go skiing. They make up around 40% of our foreign visitors. Numbers tailed off for a while after the Great East Japan Earthquake, but foreign tourists are gradually starting to come back”, says Tyler. “There are so many people around the world who are interested in traditional Japanese culture. I want to get more and more of them to come over to Japan.” 

Masaki Yamada is a freelance writer.