



*The People's Inn*

BARTHOLOMEUS GREB

**Bartholomeus Greb and his wife Chikae run a popular Japanese-style inn on the western coast of Shikoku island whose status and activities as a registered tangible cultural property are revitalizing the local community.**

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**TOSHIO MATSUBARA**

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**L**OCATED in the small coastal city of Uwajima in Ehime Prefecture, Kiya Ryokan is an elegant two-story wooden inn, founded in 1911, which has accommodated influential politicians and great men of letters. When the business closed in 1995, the Uwajima City Government bought and preserved the building before a new company, established by a few dozen like-minded people, reopened the inn in April 2012. Today the inn is growing in popularity with Japanese and foreign tourists alike.

For the inn's initial renovation, new features were introduced to the interior with a view to retaining the atmosphere created by the traditional methods

of construction. Some tatami mats on the second floor were replaced with transparent acrylic plates, for example, exposing the wooden beams and the floor beneath. The inn was designated as a tangible cultural property in 2014.

The inn is managed by Bartholomeus Greb. Born in Poland and raised in Germany, Greb has developed an original management style alongside his wife, Chikae, and he has been appointed a Cool Japan Ambassador for his work.

"I started to feel attracted by Japanese culture when I moved to Freiburg in Germany at the age of nine and began to practice karate," says Greb. As a student of Freiburg University, Greb went to Japan to study at Ehime University in Matsuyama, the sister city of Freiburg, for one year from October 2005. This experience boosted his interest in Japan. After graduating, Greb moved once again to Matsuyama "out of his strong motivation to know more about the depth of Japanese culture." He studied hard while teaching English and German, and when the Uwajima City Government started advertising for a

The external appearance of Kiya Ryokan has remained largely unchanged since its construction in 1911.



Simply beautiful: The large guest room at Kiya Ryokan

manager for Kiya Ryokan, he applied.

“I thought that the job would set the stage for learning deeply,” he says. “When I was asked at the interview what I thought the most important requirement for working at an inn was, I answered, ‘Heart.’ The way I serve customers is the same way I welcome friends at home. I try to express my gratitude as concretely as possible.”

At Kiya Ryokan, a minimum of two and maximum ten guests can reserve the entire building. Once checked in, guests are free to use the inn in any way they like. For example, guests have held a wine tasting party and a concert while staying at the inn, and an American and Japanese couple even held a wedding ceremony at the inn, inviting their family from Hawaii.

Greb adds, “In addition to giving guests the opportunity to enjoy the unique atmosphere of Kiya Ryokan, we inquire about their tastes and then introduce tourist spots or shops that might appeal to them. More than anything else, we hope that guests will enjoy socializing with local people, because interesting stories will emerge from such communication.”

All photos: Nobutada Omote



On the inn's second floor, transparent acrylic panels have replaced some of the traditional tatami mats.

Greb has discovered and introduced many attractive spots that even local people are either not familiar with or perhaps know so well that they often do not realize their charms. Working in collaboration with Uwajima City’s tourism association, he has also launched a website called “Uwajima Deep” to help introduce the attractions of the city. The number of visitors to Kiya Ryokan continues to increase and the inn has many repeat guests. Some people even visit the city specifically to stay at the inn.

Greb says, “Our local revitalization efforts have to make local people happy as well as attract tourists. We need a vision for thirty years and beyond. Kiya Ryokan is for local citizens; it is a part of the local history. I hope that in the future local people will keep this inn running themselves. For my part, I want to play the role of a bridge-builder between Japan and Europe.” 🇯🇵