While the days are still as hot as ever in Gifu, we are beginning to hear the footsteps of autumn approaching in the not-too-distant future! In this September edition, as always, I’ll be bringing you some of the notable attractions in Gifu Prefecture, the Heartland of Japan, and I hope that the newsletter proves useful to you as you prepare for a trip here! This month I will be profiling Gero City and will introduce you to some of the places to go and ways to enjoy a destination proud to be the home of one of Japan’s Three Great Hot Springs!

Gifu Castle Autumn Panoramic Nightscape

September 1~October 14 (weekends and holidays) From the lookout of Gifu Castle at the peak of Mt. Kinka, the view of the glittering city below reaching into the horizon is a spectacular sight. Just as the great lord Oda Nobunaga did centuries ago, keep a watch over the castle on all sides while enjoying the cool breeze of the mountaintop!

■Time: Until 9:30pm
■Venue: 18 Kinka-zan Tenshukaku, Gifu City
■Tel.: +81-58-265-4141
■Getting there: Gifu Bus (towards “Nagara-bashi”) from either JR or Meitetsu Gifu Stations→get off at “Gifu Koen/Rekishi Hakubutsukan-mae”→Mt. Kinka Ropeway from Gifu Park→8-minute walk to the castle
■Price: Admission to Gifu Castle—¥200 (adults) or ¥100 (children); Special roundtrip ropeway fare—¥800 (adults, age 12 or above) or ¥400 (children, ages 4 to 11)

http://www.gifucvb.or.jp/en/01_sightseeing/01_02.html

40th Kashimo Kabuki Extravaganza

September 2 Kabuki theater has thrived in Gifu’s region of Tono and continues to do so to this day, with many kabuki halls still in use and playing host to one of Gifu’s treasures, “local kabuki.” As you might guess from the name, this is kabuki performed not by professionals, but by the townspeople themselves—amateurs who embrace the art with a fervor that is something special to behold. Among the playhouses still in use is the Kashimo Meijiza, which has hosted performances for over 100 years and which is home to the annual Kashimo Kabuki Extravaganza. On this day, 5 shows will be performed, including a play with child actors, a particularly stirring sight that is among the more distinctive elements of Gifu’s local kabuki! This year is the 40th anniversary, so you can be sure that you’ll see something special if you make your way to Kashimo Meijiza!

■Time: 11am
■Tel.: +81-573-79-2111
■Venue: Kashimo Meijiza, 4793-2 Kashimo, Nakatsugawa City
■Getting there: 45 minutes by car from the Nakatsugawa Interchange off the Chuo Expressway

http://meijiza.jp/index.html (Jpn.)

Travel back in time to the Edo period!

September 8~October 28 (weekends and holidays) Looking forward to strolling down the old streets of Takayama? Why don’t you do so in traditional Japanese fashion to match your surroundings?! No worries if you don’t know how to put on a kimono or kamishimo (traditional men’s garb)...they’ll do it for you at the Takayama City Memorial Hall! While renting the clothes, you are also granted free admission to 16 tourist sights around the city and are presented with a commemorative photo; by the time you’re done, you’ll surely have created memories to last you a lifetime! No reservations required, so just stop by!! Rentals also available during the Takayama Autumn Festival (October 9-10).

■Time: 9am~3pm
■Tel.: +81-577-32-3333
■Venue: Takayama City Memorial Hall, 4-15 Shinmei-machi, Takayama City
■Getting there: 12-minute walk from JR Takayama Station
■Price: ¥1,500 for 2 hours and ¥500 for every 30 minutes after that


Making a trip to Takayama easier and more affordable than ever! Gifu Prefecture and the JR Central Japan Railway Company continue to bring you an independent travel package to Takayama like no other! 3 nights in Takayama and 2 nights in Nagoya PLUS round-trip train tickets from Nagoya to Takayama PLUS round-trip tickets to Kyoto or Ise or Shizuoka (your choice of 1 of these 3) PLUS more! For detailed information about this jam-packed travel option, please refer to the following webpage:

September 22

In the town of Hida Furukawa, where traditions are greatly valued and passed down over the generations, the “Fox Fire Festival” stands out as a particularly unique one! This annual festival celebrates the marriage of foxes, an event that in Japan is connected to the “kitsunebi (literally, fox fire)” or “wisp of the willow” ghostly lights seen at night. Those who catch a glimpse of the foxes’ marriage ceremony are said to be blessed with a bountiful harvest, booming business, and safety for their families, so I encourage you to step into this mystical world and take in everything this one-of-a-kind festival has to offer!

■ Time: Wedding procession begins at 6pm
■ Location: Festival Square and the town streets of Furukawa-cho, Hida City
■ Getting there: JR Takayama Main Line to Hida Furukawa Station → 5-minute walk

Announcing the G-PASS 2.0!!

Gifu Prefecture has again teamed up with Central Nippon Expressway to bring you a new and improved version of the “G-PASS” (official name: “Central Nippon Expressway Pass 2012 in Autumn!”) This pass allows users to drive the designated toll roads in the central Japan area at a flat rate and utilizes ETC cards to make passing through the tolls a breeze! While formerly there were two passes that covered different areas, these have been combined into one comprehensive pass that is available for three time spans: 3 days (¥10,000), 5 days (¥13,000), and 7 days (¥16,000). You can choose the one that best fits your trip, but no matter which one, you will save anywhere between 20%-50% by using the G-PASS instead of just paying at every toll! Additionally, both Toyota Rent-a-Car and Mazda Car Rental are now offering the G-PASS, so I highly recommend to anybody arriving at Central Japan International Airport interested in driving in this region to make use of the pass! Available through November 14 (will be implemented again in the spring)

All Roads Lead to GIFU: Part III Gero City

This month I will profile another of the famous destinations in Gifu Prefecture, Gero City! Though the main attraction—and most well-known location—is of course the Gero Hot Spring town, there is more to Gero than this, including perhaps my favorite spot in the entire prefecture, Osaka Falls! Especially for users of public transportation, it will take a little bit of time to leave the central area of the hot spring district, but I hope that you will be willing to wander a bit off the beaten track because it is definitely worth it!

First, a little background on Gero Hot Spring. Well-known even internationally, Gero is renowned as one of Japan’s three most famous hot springs and has been for many a century. It was in the 1400s when the Zen Buddhist monk Banri Shuku named Gero, Kusatsu, and Arima as the three best hot springs in the land, and around two hundred years later, famed Confucian scholar and a tutor at the Imperial House named Hayashi Razan affirmed Banri’s list and made it, in essence, “official.” Gero’s hot spring history dates back over 1,000 years, though, far predating either of these lists, and the area surrounding JR Gero Station today remains almost exclusively hot spring-centered. If you love Japanese hot springs and want to really immerse yourself in them, both literally and figuratively, then Gero would make a great destination for you!

I have been to Gero quite a number of times, and I’m being completely honest when I say that every time I go, I am surprised by the incredible silkiness of the water! Now, there are many kinds of hot spring throughout Japan, and even the Three Great Hot Springs mentioned above are quite different from one another. The alkaline properties of the hot spring water in Gero make it almost like soap, in that it is incredibly cleansing for your skin and has a velvety smooth touch. Walking around the town, there are a whopping eight foot baths, so during your stroll, you can just stop at one, take your shoes and socks off, and relax for a few minutes while soaking your legs and feeling how the texture differs from that of the water you’re used to! These foot baths are free and can be quite a nice respite from the hustle and bustle of travel.

Of course, when coming to Gero, you have to get into more than just a foot bath! Staying at a ryokan (Japanese-style inn) would obviously guarantee that you can fully enjoy some of the fantastic hot spring baths available here. But if you are not planning on staying the night, or if you are but want to experience more variety than just the baths in your chosen accommodation, there is a great option called the “Gero Onsen Yumefun Yumeguri Pass,” which will (at ¥1,200) allow you to bathe in three baths out of those at the many participating hotels! If interested, be sure to inquire about it at the Gero City Tourist Information Center adjacent to the train station, where you can also purchase it. In fact, the Information Center is a great resource for more than just this Pass; the staff there will even go as far as to help you reserve accommodations, so even if you have come with no concrete plans to stay the night, you can still do so with ease!

Gifu Crossroads September 2012
For questions, comments, or to unsubscribe, please contact c11334@pref.gifu.lg.jp
For more on tourism in Gifu Prefecture, please refer to the following resources:

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Gifu Crossroads Facebook Page
http://www.facebook.com/pages/Gifu-Crossroads/165137586854382

☆☆ ☆☆
Gifu Crossroads Blog
http://gifucrossroads.wordpress.com/

Gifu Travel Guide

Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO)
http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/

Central Japan Tourism Promotion Association

Yuamiya ontama soft-serve ice cream (left); Shirasagi-za Shadow Play Theater in the Gassho Village (below)

Getting back to strolling the streets, one place I particularly recommend is the sweets shop called Yuamiya. In front of the store is the most famous foot bath in town, which you can soak your feet in while indulging in an onsen tamago (egg cooked in hot spring water)-topped soft serve ice cream, the shop’s specialty! Mix the contents before you dig in and the entire thing becomes a creamy delicacy that is one of the best ice cream-based desserts I have ever had! Gero is all about “you-time,” refreshing and revitalizing yourself physically and mentally, and we all know that delicious sweets go a long way toward that end! :)

After walking the town for a bit, one nice detour would be to the Gero Hot Spring Gassho Village, an open-air museum where you can get a glimpse into the lifestyle of days long gone. As in Shirakawa-go, gassho-zukuri houses with thatched roofs like hands in prayer are preserved here, and as in the Hida Folk Village in Takayama, the insides of these houses tell you a lot about the way people used to live. I recommend taking a walk through the various houses here and then trying out an activity such as ceramics painting or Japanese paper-making, which are available on the grounds of the Village. Additionally, the most distinctive element of this museum is the Shadow Play Theater “Shirasagi-za,” where local legends and folktales are told in dynamic fashion and brilliant color by a theater troupe that specializes in shadow play. In fact, Shirasagi-za is the only permanent shadow play theater in the entire nation, so it’s a nice place to see a fusion of the new and old…new-age, CG-filled colorful shows and old-age, traditional hand shadow art. I would encourage you to make it to the 2nd performance of the day, at noon, since after that showing is the only time when the troupe shows off their prodigious hand shadow skills! Though you can also take a bus to the Gassho Village, it is merely a 10-minute walk from where Yuamiya is located, so unless the weather is horrid, walking is the way to go! And there is even a foot bath on the way, in case you feel like taking a breather!

Now then, I’ve laid out a couple of ways to enjoy the hot spring town, so it’s time to remove ourselves a bit and step into the wild of Gero City’s lush natural environment. Designated as one of Gifu Prefecture’s four “Brand New Treasures,” Osaka Falls is a treasure trove of refreshing energy, with over 200 waterfalls (each over 5 meters in height)—the most of any area in Japan. While getting to Gero is as easy as can be (just take a JR train from JR Nagoya or Gifu Stations on the Takayama Line to Gero), things get a bit more complicated when making your way to Osaka (not to be confused with Osaka Prefecture/Osaka City). So independent travelers will want to catch a bus to either “Himeshaga no yu” or “Gandate iriguchi” on the “Gero Yuya” Line in order to get there. Either stop will do, as they are practically right next to each other and are about a 15-minute walk from the heart of Gandate Park, the entrance to the waterfall heaven (and make sure to take these 15 minutes into account in your scheduling!)! The tricky part is getting on the right bus…since there is no English signage at the Nohi Bus stop across the street from Gero Station, it’s going to be necessary to confirm the time of the bus that you should be getting on with a staff member at the Tourist Information Center mentioned above. While you’re there, make sure to ask about return times! If there’s one thing you should take away from these posts…one could argue that it’s to rely on and get as much information as possible from tourist information booths!!

Assuming that we’ve arrived safely at Gandate Park, it’s time to be blasted by negative ions which surround the area and are supposed to be ultra-healthy since they calm you and lower your heart rate! The beginner-class courses are all free of charge, except for the requested ¥100 donation for upkeep costs, so you can freely enter the wilderness and make your way to the popular “Mitsu no taki” (“triiple waterfall”) which is just a few minutes’ walk from the park. This, with the several nearby waterfalls, comprises the “Mitsu no taki” course, which is easily accessible and incredibly fulfilling! Still, it will take some time to get from one waterfall to another, and the course will take between 2 to 3 hours round-trip. Other courses, including Neo Falls (selected as one of Japan’s 100 best waterfalls), are not so close to Gandate Park and will truly require an entire day without the benefit of a car.

The solution: hire a guide! For the beginner-level courses (Neo Falls course included), one guide will cost ¥10,000 for up to 10 people, a price well worth it given the payoff that comes in the form of awe and wonder when you reach the waterfall after an hour plus-long hike! The staff at Osaka Falls are unable to take inquiries in English, but to request a guide, you can email an NPO at the following address: hidaosaka200taki@ever.ocn.ne.jp. In English, please make clear your request for a guide, the desired course (Neo Falls, etc.), the date, time, spoken language, and number of people, and be sure to do this at least a couple of days in advance! You really do feel incredibly relaxed and refreshed when trekking through the waterfall-laden forest, and the sensation of the mist and wind blowing at you from the base of a waterfall is a thrilling one and is something that I hope you all experience when coming to Gero! In this way, a trip here is marked by rejuvenating your mind and body with the magic-like properties of Gero’s water, both the hot spring water bubbling up from the ground and the colder fresh water cascading over the rocky ledges in Osaka!