

The Scenery Depicted in Kawabata Yasunari's Masterpiece, *Snow Country*



Kawabata Yasunari (far left) visited Yuzawa during the filming of the movie, *Snow Country*, in 1957. (Far right: movie director Toyoda Shiro; Second from the right: Edward G. Seidensticker, who translated *Snow Country* into English)

Photo: Yuzawa Board of Education

Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972) was the first Japanese writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968. His masterpiece, *Yukiguni (Snow Country)*, is set in the *onsen* (hot spring) area of Echigo Yuzawa¹, which is renowned for its heavy snowfall. Here we introduce locations where you can immerse yourself in the world of his literary creation. (Text: Morohashi Kumiko)

Kawabata Yasunari, a representative author of modern and contemporary Japanese literature, is famous for the opening line, “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country,”² from his famous masterpiece, *Snow Country*. The narrative revolves around the complex human relationships between Shimamura, a writer living off an inherited fortune with a family, and Komako, a geisha he encounters in the snow country. It is a lyrical tale depicting complex human relationships. The long tunnel mentioned in the novel refers to the Shimizu Tunnel³, which connects Gunma and Niigata Prefectures. Kawabata himself passed through this long tunnel on a locomotive in 1934 and visited Yuzawa Town

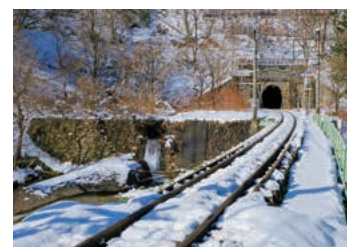


Photo: PIXTA

Above: The Shimizu Tunnel, believed to be the inspiration for the long tunnel described at the beginning of the novel, is part of the current JR Joetsu Line, measuring a total length of 9,702 meters

Below: An exhibition corner featuring the relocated room where Matsue, believed to be the model for the heroine Komako in the novel *Snow Country*, lived, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the narrative's world at the Yuzawa Museum of History and Folklore (Yukiguni-kan)



Photo: Yukiguni-kan



Above: Kawabata, known for his love of hot springs, made frequent visits to Yuzawa.

Below: Takahan Ryokan, where Kawabata stayed during his visits to Yuzawa in the mid-1950s

Photo: PIXTA



Photo: Yuzawa Board of Education



Photo: Yuzawa Board of Education



Photo: PIXTA

Above: The ski resort in Echigo Yuzawa during the 1950s

Below: The snowy landscape of Yuzawa viewed from the Yuzawa Kogen Ski Resort

in Echigo Yuzawa, a hot spring resort area.

We spoke with the staff of Yuzawa Museum of History and Folklore (Yukiguni-kan) where exhibits focus on *Snow Country* and the life and history of Yuzawa. “Impressed by the high-quality hot springs and delicious cuisine during his first visit, Kawabata developed a strong liking for Yuzawa. Approximately two months later, he revisited the town. While there are different theories, I believe that it was during this visit that Kawabata may have encountered Matsue, the geisha believed to be the inspiration for the heroine Komako. Afterwards, he visited Yuzawa three more times before completing *Snow Country*.”

The Takahan Ryokan, where Kawabata stayed when he visited Yuzawa, is still in operation today as Yukiguni no Yado Takahan. Visitors can even tour the Kasumi no Ma room, where Kawabata did his writing.

Snow Country has received high acclaim both domestically and internationally. It is currently translated and published worldwide, attracting many fans from abroad to visit Yuzawa.

According to the museum personnel, “While the title of the book is *Snow Country*, the entire story doesn’t exclusively take place during the snowy season. Kawabata himself didn’t visit Yuzawa during times of heavy snowfall, and there are not many depictions of scenes where life is buried under snow. Yet, the phrase ‘The earth lay white under the night sky’² that follows the opening passage conveys the subdued darkness and heaviness specific to the

snowy landscape. It suggests a cold village isolated by the deep mountains, with its inhabitants persisting with determination as snow softly blankets their surroundings. This evocative scene captivates the imagination. When reading *Snow Country*, even if you’ve never seen snow or experienced such a landscape, somehow the image of a silvery world comes to mind, and you might feel a sense of nostalgia for snowy landscapes.”

Kawabata revised *Snow Country* multiple times until his later years.

“Two months before his death, Kawabata left behind a handwritten piece titled Yukiguni-sho based on the novel. It seems he had a special attachment to this work.”

In addition to Yukiguni-kan and Takahan, there are other notable places where visitors can immerse themselves in the world of the novel, such as the communal bath, Komako no Yu, and Suwa Shrine. Today, it is extremely easy to travel to Echigo Yuzawa, taking just one hour from Tokyo by Shinkansen. Why not take the opportunity to visit and witness the snowy landscapes beyond the tunnel? **1**

1. The collective term for hot spring resorts surrounding Yuzawa Town in Minamiuonuma District, Niigata Prefecture. Initially known as Yuzawa Onsen, it underwent a name change to Echigo Yuzawa Station when the shinkansen commenced operations, aiming to differentiate it from Yuzawa City in Akita Prefecture. Consequently, the term Echigo Yuzawa Onsen gained broader usage.
2. From the English edition translated by Edward G. Seidensticker
3. Completed in 1931, this tunnel stretches across Gunma and Niigata Prefectures, allowing the JR Joetsu Line to pass through. Situated on the mountainside of Mount Tanigawa, it is an extensive single-track (uphill track) tunnel with a length of 9,702 meters. At the time of completion, it held the record as the largest in Japan and the Orient, and the 9th largest in the world.