



Asuka Village



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What is Kusaki-zome?

Kusaki-zome refers to the art of using plant leaves, stems, roots, etc. as a fabric dye. In this article, I visit Mizutani Kusaki-zome, located in the serene natural landscape of Asuka Village, to share my experience dyeing fabric using this traditional method.

A flag with the phrase “Kusaki-zome Workshop and Classroom” in Japanese marks the location. Beautiful flowers in many colors bloom in the garden surrounding the building. In the workshop, many cloth handkerchiefs and scarves dyed with this method are on display, making the room colorful.

The Wisdom of Ancient Peoples



Upon entering the workshop, instructor Ms. Michiko Mizutani began to explain the characteristics and ancient history of plant-based dyeing. Although plant dyes are not very resilient and prone to fading,

over time, the dyes take on a rich tone. Even if the same dye is used, subtle differences in coloration can occur due to the season and temperature, so the fact that each item is one-of-a-kind is another benefit to using plant dyes. In ancient times, single colors were preferred so that items could be dyed repeatedly, preventing fading.

This is a technique that developed through use in everyday life. For example, ancient people would use chestnut leaves to prevent rashes from poison ivy when traveling into the mountains, boiling them to make a juice which was applied over the body. As I listened to Ms. Mizutani’s story, I was moved by the wisdom of the ancient people.

Patterns and Techniques of Old



Next, she taught me about the patterns and techniques from the past. The pattern murakumo (literally “cloud village”) is made by using a round roller on the fabric to create wrinkles and then submerging it, roller and all, into the dye. This is called murakumo shibori. The final design resembles the shape of clouds. Other patterns include sun, rainbow, waves, bamboo, and mitsuuroko, a repeating triangle pattern. Another, called tortoiseshell, is said to have been brought to Japan from ancient China.

I was surprised by the wide variety of patterns, but it appears that ancient people wondered how they could reproduce the beauty of the natural world around them, and, through trial and error, kusaki-zome was born.

Kusaki-zome Workshop

With that, I finally began the plant dyeing workshop under the guidance of Ms. Mizutani. As my base fabric, I chose a handkerchief with a floral design. For the pattern of my dye, I chose the mitsuuroko design from ancient times. My guide taught me how to fold the fabric, then place it in between two boards, holding it in place with rubber bands. The dyeing portion was done outside, and my instructor graciously prepared 9 different dyes for me to use. As the dyes will go bad if left out for extended periods, leftover dye is usually discarded. With a laugh, Ms. Mizutani explained to me that this practice is one of the more luxurious aspects of kusaki-zome.



To begin, aluminum foil is used to cover the portions of the cloth which will not be dyed, and then the folded cloth is submerged in a pot of boiled onion skins to achieve a golden color. Once dyed, the foil is removed, and the cloth is rinsed with water. Ms. Mizutani explained that aluminum foil was of course not used in ancient times, so I wondered how ancient people achieved the same effect.



Next, I chose a deep red color made from the roots of the Rubia flower. In China, red is a color that represents good fortune. After dyeing, I again rinsed the cloth with water. After that, to complement the red from the Rubia flower, I chose a purple color made from plums. Working together with Ms. Mizutani, we made sure that the dye transferred deep into the cloth for a vivid final product. To finish, we again rinsed the cloth under water while stretching it, and my one-of-a-kind handkerchief was complete. Unfolding the cloth, the final colors were even more beautiful than I had imagined, and I was deeply moved.

In Conclusion

With 40 years of history, the Mizutani Kusaki-zome Classroom has kept alive and continues to teach the methods of ancient times. I had a wonderful time trying plant-based dyeing while listening to the stories of old. If you visit Asuka Village, why not give it a try? I am sure it will make for a great memory.

- [Address](https://mizutani-kusakizome.com/): 448 Tachibe, Asuka, Takaichi District, Nara 〒634-0143
- <https://mizutani-kusakizome.com/>



“Asuka no Sato Mendoya” is an over 100-year-old restaurant where you can enjoy the cuisine of Asuka Village and Nara Prefecture. In this article, I would like to share with our readers not only the history of Nara, but also one of its delicious regional cuisines.

I sat down with 5th-gen. owner Ms. Kimiko Kitami to ask about Asuka Village and her experience running the restaurant.

1. How many years have you been open? And was it always in Asuka Village?

I don't know the actual opening date, but it has been around for over 100 years at least. It has been renovated several times, but it's always been right where it is now. I think it's the oldest store in Asuka Village.



2. As a restaurant with such a long history, can you share with us the keys to its success?

The menu here has always changed in accordance with the preferences of the times. For example, back when there were no family restaurants in the village, we served hamburgers. We also make bento boxes for locals. Our Asuka hot pot also changes seasonally to include different vegetables, and as a policy we never use artificial flavorings, only offering things we think are good for the body.



3. Are there many foreign visitors? Has travel here been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Before COVID, there were many visitors from China, Korea, France, and other countries. Now with COVID, it is true that we have less customers and our profits have gone down, but it hasn't been enough to force us to close. “Mendoya” is not only visited by tourists, but also local regulars and domestic visitors from distant cities like Osaka, so we have been very fortunate not to be drastically affected by the pandemic.

4. What is the best part of Asuka Village? What is the one thing you'd like our readers to know?

Asuka Village is known not only for Asuka Period burial mounds like Komatsuzuka Kofun and Ishibutai Kofun, but also for its beautiful scenery and air. It is where you can feel the presence of nature. Visiting is a priceless experience, so I encourage “Na no Ra” readers to see it for themselves.



After the interview, I tried the Asuka hot pot course. It consists of the hot pot, sesame tofu, boiled veggies, persimmon leaf sushi, homemade warabi mochi, and seasonal fruits. I was most surprised by the white soup, made by adding milk to the broth. After adding pumpkin; broccoli; tofu; enoki, shimeji, and shiitake mushrooms; asparagus; Japanese mustard spinach; and chicken, a sweet aroma wafted up from the pot. I enjoyed the enoki and asparagus the most, but the flavor of each ingredient combined with the soup was delicious. The soft, chewy texture of the tofu and its richness left quite the impression.



I often enjoy eating spicy hot pots, so this was my first time trying a mild one. Asuka hot pot uses subtle seasoning and is quite mild, making it easy to eat. I would recommend

“Mendoya” to anyone interested in the regional cuisines of Nara. Why not take a moment to appreciate the beautiful scenery and rich history of Asuka Village while enjoying an Asuka hot pot?

• Address: 40 Oka, Asuka, Takaichi District, Nara 〒634-0111

• https://www.instagram.com/mendoya_2055/



Scattered throughout Asuka Village, you can find a variety of stone sculptures, each with their own legends and stories. In this article, I introduce the hidden charms of these sculptures.

Monkey Stones (Saru Ishi)

When you hear “Monkey Stones”, you might imagine stones carved in the shape of a monkey. However, of the 5, only 1 is a monkey. This stone is in the neighboring town Takatori. I would like to introduce the other 4 stones, located 5 minutes from Kintetsu Asuka Station in front of the Tomb of Kibihimenomiko.

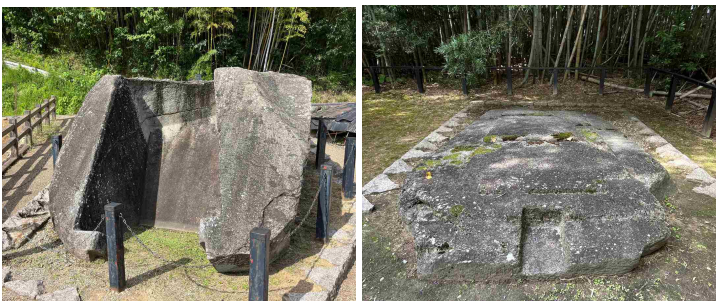


From left to right: "Woman", "Sanno Gongen", "Priest" and "Man"

It is said that the Monkey Stones were made in the Asuka Period (7th century) around the time of Empress Saimei's ascension. Each stone is about 1 meter tall. While their faces resemble those of monkeys, it is said that they are meant to be Chinese and Korean settlers to Japan.

The Monkey Stones are called, from left to right, “Woman”, “Sanno Gongen”, “Priest”, and “Man”, each named based on their appearance. On the other side of “Woman”, “Sanno Gongen”, and “Man”, it is said that you can see a face like that of Amanojaku, a demon from Japanese folklore. Today, as the stones are behind a fence you unfortunately cannot see the other side, but you can see this side if you visit the replica at the Asuka Historical Museum.

Coming to Asuka Village and seeing the Monkey Stones for myself inspired me, and I wondered why these stones were made. Imagining the world of old while gazing upon the Monkey Stones is one interesting way to view them.



"Oni no Secchin"

"Oni no Manaita"

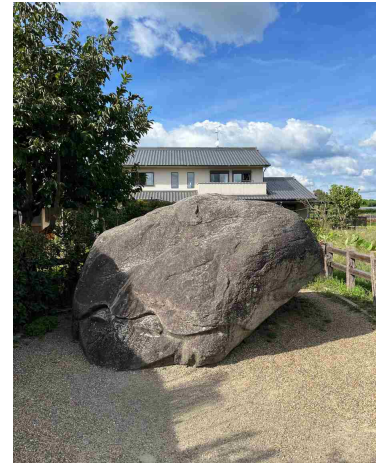
Demon's Privy & Cutting Board

“Oni no Secchin” (Demon's Privy) and “Oni no Manaita” (Demon's Cutting Board) are, as their names suggest, both related to legends involving demons.

The demons that lived nearby were said to create mist to fool lost travelers before bringing them to Demon's Cutting Board to cook them. Once full, it is said that they would take care of their business at Demon's Privy. I'd be careful if traveling here late at night!

Turtle Stone

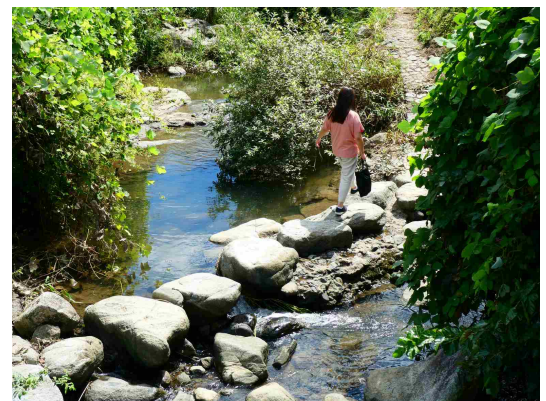
The Turtle Stone is one of the stone sculptures representing Asuka Village. It is so named because, as you can see in the picture to the right, it is a turtle. Its funny expression has also become a PR symbol of travel to the region. It is not clear when or why it was made, but one theory goes that the sculpture once marked the boundary of Kawaharadera, a temple that once existed here.



Actually, there is a terrifying legend surrounding this turtle that would not be apparent from its cute exterior. Long ago, when the ancient land of Yamato was a lake, a battle erupted between the lands of Taima and Kawara. After a long fight, the lake water was claimed by Taima. During the battle, many turtles were accidentally killed. In their memory, the villagers created the stone. Now, it faces southwest, but originally it is said that it faced north, then east. According to prophecy, if it ever dares to turn west and glare upon the Taima region, then all of Yamato Basin (present-day Nara Basin) will be reduced to mud!

Asuka River Stepping Stones

This is the name for a group of stones that form a bridge over Asuka River, and also appear in the famous Manyoshu collection of poetry. Passages referring to crossing this bridge were code for having a lovers' rendezvous. The bridge often appears in Manyoshu poems to represent the distance between lovers.



Asuka River Stepping Stones (下流川)

Asuka River / Tomorrow shall we cross again the stone bridge /

Distant hearts too much to bear

Meaning: Let's cross the Asuka River with these stepping-stones tomorrow. I can't bear to be apart from you the way the stones of this bridge are.

What at first glance appear to be just stones are transformed by the hidden story they contain. This is part of the fun of taking a stone tour of Asuka Village.

In Asuka Village, there are many farmhouses, but this time, I would like to introduce "Kotorian", a farmhouse located within 7 minutes from Kintetsu Asuka Station.

Built around 120 years ago, Kotorian is a renovated farmhouse that preserves its traditional feel while being easy to live in. As I'd never been inside an old Japanese home before, it was very exciting to be able to visit Kotorian in-person. The owner, Mr. Isao Ogawa, kindly gave me a tour of the property.

Living Room

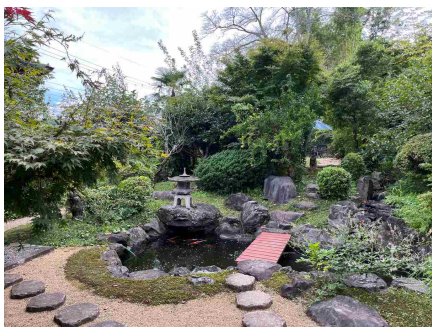
First, he showed me around the living room. Since there is a large glass door on the side, the space feels very open. I could also see the pride of Kotorian, its garden, through the glass. I felt relaxed gazing upon it from the living area.



As I began the interview, the owner's wife brought out homemade candied chestnuts for us. The chestnuts were grown on the property. While enjoying their sweet flavor, I listened as Mr. Ogawa began to tell the story of Kotorian.

Garden

The beautiful garden is one of his favorite places in the home. In the garden, there is a lake with koi fish, many varieties of trees, and, on the farther end, a 100-year-old cherry blossom tree.



According to Mr. Ogawa, spring and fall are when the garden is at its most beautiful, and, in these seasons, there is a flood of reservations. His favorite way to enjoy the garden is to sit on the outer veranda. Sitting there with a cup of hot tea, and, on rainy days, observing the change of scenery, are his recommendations.

Japanese-Style (Tatami) Room



After enjoying the garden, next I was led into the Japanese-style room, where I could really feel the Showa era aesthetic.

According to the owner, this room is especially popular for visiting families. Made up of furniture and knick-knacks from antique markets in Kyoto as well as from other old homes, the room has a quaint, nostalgic atmosphere. Japanese visitors can enjoy the nostalgia, while foreign visitors have a chance to experience old Japan, so I felt that it makes for an ideal cultural experience all around.

Stairway and Attic

Moving to the 2nd floor, the first thing that caught my eye was the unique staircase. It was made of dressers, which I'd never seen before. According to the owner, it is at least 100 years old, and he found it at a Kyoto antique market.



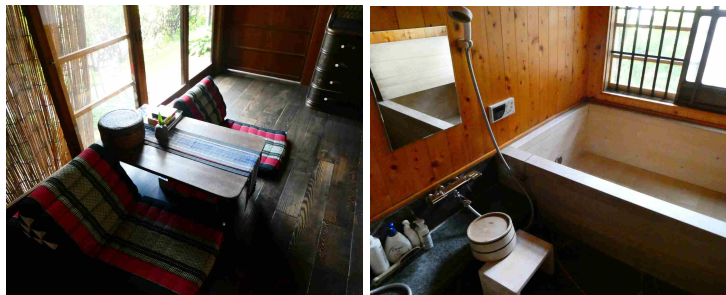
Stairway to the 2nd floor

Taking this peculiar staircase up to the 2nd floor, I found an attic space that both kids and adults would enjoy. What was once a storage space had been converted into an area where families could chat before bed. I felt it would make for a nice memory.

In Conclusion

The reason the owner couple of Kotorian continue doing what they do is the joy they feel when departing guests say they had a good stay. They also said that they like reading the feedback guests leave in the guestbook and feel grateful to have such kind and respectful visitors.

When I asked them what they thought were the merits of Asuka Village, they gave a rather unexpected answer: the fact that there is nothing! I was surprised, assuming they would answer with something about the beauty of nature in Asuka Village, or the long history. But, compared to the crowded streets of Kyoto, Asuka is quite empty, and while there is nothing, it is a place where you can relax, so, I found myself agreeing with their answer.



Lastly, I would like to share a message from the owners to our readers:

"Asuka is the spiritual center and birthplace of Japan. Please come and see it for yourself!"

- Address: 1473 Mayumi, Asuka, Takaichi District, Nara 〒634-0137
- <https://kotorian.jp/>



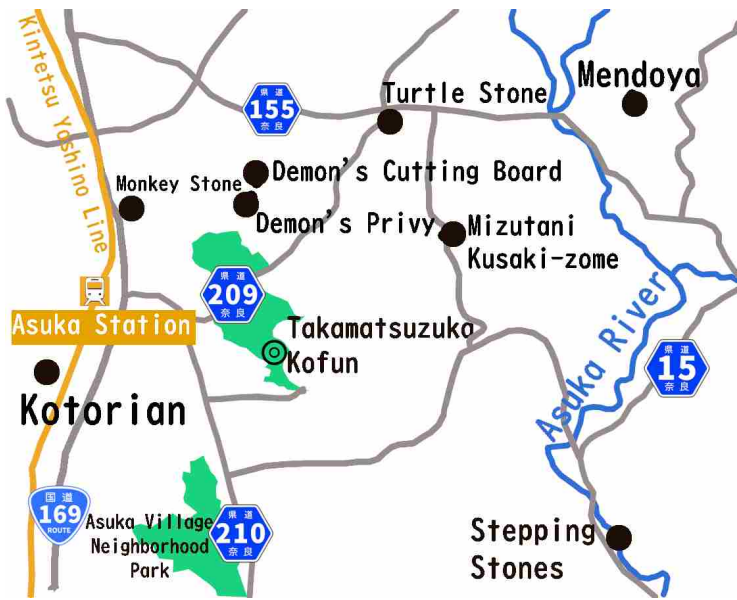
Editor's Note

What is "Na no Ra"?

"NanoRa" is made up of articles about places in the prefecture that we, as foreign residents ourselves, visited and thought would be of interest to both visitors from overseas and the local Nara community.

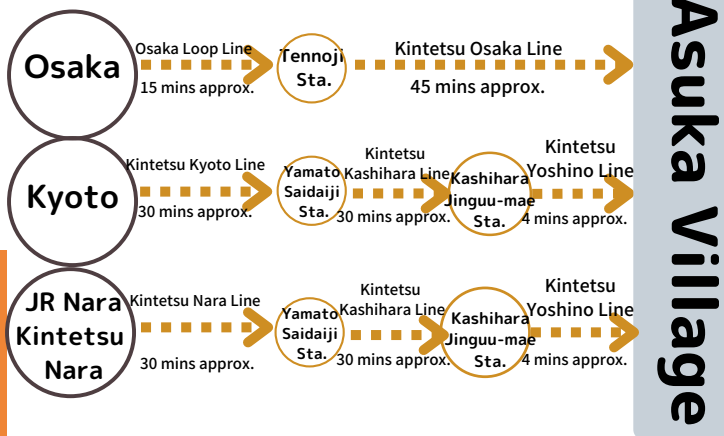
We hope it will be of some interest and serve to help everyone discover the charm that Nara holds.

Area Map



Access

By train



By car

from Osaka : Approx. 1 hr 10 mins.
 from Kyoto : Approx. 1 hr 30 mins.
 from Nara : Approx. 1 hr

} to Asuka Village



Yafang Xiong (Left)



Nara is a place with deep ties to China. If you visit, you can experience its rich history and enjoy regional dishes. In this issue, I visited the Mizutani Kusaki-zome Workshop. I was very impressed with the vivid finish of the dyeing I was able to achieve with only plants. Also, I paid a visit to "Asuka no Sato Mendoya", an established restaurant specializing in the local cuisine.

Asuka Village is a really special place, so I encourage you to visit and experience it for yourself!

Youngme Lee (Right)



As explored in this issue, Asuka Village is a place with a long history known for its many ancient stone relics. In addition to those introduced here, there are many more preserved ruins. There is also beautiful natural scenery, so I felt that it is a place where you can be at peace.

Why not visit the many places Asuka Village has to offer?

Special Thanks

In this issue, we would like to sincerely thank the staff of Mizutani Kusaki-zome, Asuka no Sato "Mendoya", Farmhouse "Kotoriya", Asuka Village Office, and the Imperial Household Agency for their cooperation.

Na no Ra

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