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SASAYAMA
JAPAN

Jokamachi Dori is the kind of picturesque street that travellers to Japan are longing to find. The small winding thoroughfare in the 400-year-old castle town of Sasayama is lined with old homes and shops. The town stretches out, fringed by persimmon trees, bamboo groves and rice fields. Though it's only an hour by car from the cities of Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe, Sasayama is a delightful relic of a gentler time; it is renowned for its black soy beans, yams and *matsutake* mushrooms.

Despite its many charms, Sasayama is a victim of rural depopulation – an issue all over Japan. As young people are drawn to the big cities, houses lie empty and shops have closed. “It’s a problem,” says Toshiaki Imamura, a community leader. “There are many buildings of cultural and historical significance that have little or no economic value. If we don’t communicate the importance of preserving these buildings they’ll just be knocked down and sold to developers.”

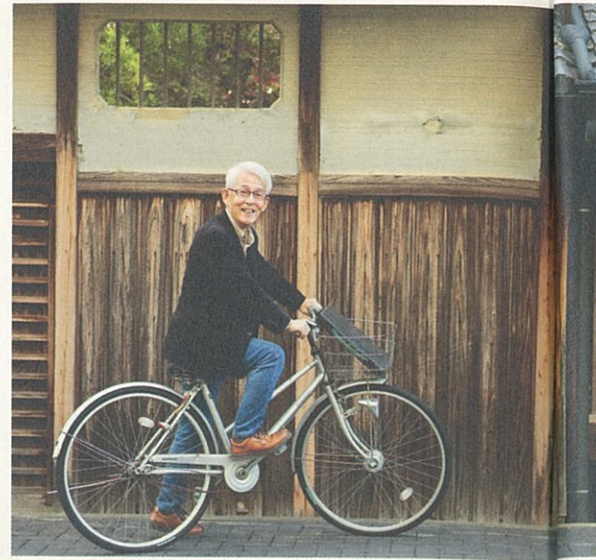
But a once-bleak picture was redrawn a decade ago with the arrival of Note, a non-profit organisation set up by Yukio Kinno, who believed that the remarkable concentration of traditional buildings in Sasayama was an asset. “We realised that, by restoring an old property, we could do everything, from boosting

tourism to farming,” says Ayako Tamagaki, Note’s project manager. So the organisation spent ¥180m acquiring five historic properties and turning them into luxury accommodation run by Valve management under the Nipponia brand name. It is rare for urban dwellers to experience such carefully renovated historic homes.

The hotel project has encouraged other businesses to open too. Yukihiro Hosotani moved from Tokyo to Sasayama two years ago to open



Breath & Roy, a craft shop and café in a beautifully refurbished building a few doors from Nipponia. “I love this place,” he says. “We’re lucky here – we’re close to snowy hot-spring towns and the warmer climes of Setouchi to the south. And it’s hard to find a town with these old buildings nowadays; people from Kyoto come



1. Community leader Toshiaki Imamura
2. Sasayama retains its old-fashioned atmosphere
3. Chef Tomoaki Maekawa
4. Original features in a Nipponia property in Sasayama
5. Staff at Onae, the main building
6. Friendly local
7. Yukihiro Hosotani moved from Tokyo to open Breath & Roy

Land of the rising scrum
Done well, tourism can rescue a town; taken too far, it can harm its identity. Ten years ago, when Japan had few visitors, no one thought it would one day suffer from an excess of tourists. Now “tourism pollution” is a concern. The Japan Tourism Agency is even conducting a survey on “overtourism”. In 2010, Japan played host to 8.6 million visitors; by 2020 the government aims to attract 40 million.

The speed of the increase is a problem and many tourists have a similar itinerary; destinations such as Mount Koya are bursting at the seams. Building an international tourism industry is a balancing act. As Sasayama shows, it can provide a vital boost to a stagnant local economy but too much can be damaging. The trick is to encourage tourists to venture beyond the “greatest hits” into lesser-known places where they’re more likely to find the authentic Japan they’re looking for.

here to escape the crowds at home.”

Tomoaki Maekawa, a 35-year-old chef, opened his own Japanese restaurant at the front of one of the Nipponia properties in 2017. Born and raised in Sasayama, Maekawa trained at a restaurant in Kyoto but dreamed of returning home. “I always wanted to open a place here,” he says. “The ingredients from around here are so good. I really like the sundried rice and ancient vegetables and I buy deer and boar from a school friend who is a hunter.”

“I love this place. We’re close to snowy towns and warmer climes to the south”

Married with two young children, he’s showing that it’s possible to reverse the move to the cities if help is offered. “The Note project is great,” he says. “I’m so happy they’re using what we already have rather than building something new.”

By spring 2019, Nipponia will expand to 10 buildings and 24 guestrooms. Note has also begun to restore Sasayama’s historic centre. Following its success here, Nipponia – in partnership with Note – is taking on projects across Japan, each in a property that might otherwise be demolished. “We’re so grateful,” says Imamura of Note’s work in Sasayama. “New people are discovering the city’s charm; it’s breathing life into the area.” — FW sasayamastay.jp