About this booklet

“Celebrating Yusuhara” is a booklet published non-periodically to share the origins of Yusuhara’s special history and culture, in hopes of inspiring readers from near and far to cultivate a future with better wellness for themselves and for all things in nature.
Yusuhara is a town nestled in north-west Kochi Prefecture, a part of the vast Shikoku Karst on the border with Ehime. Spread out over 1,200 m from top to bottom on the southern slope of the Shikoku Mountains, the town is 90 percent covered with forests from which the Yusuhara and Shimagawa Rivers flow and provide clear water to the Shimanto River. It is here in this land blessed with lush greenery and rivers that Yusuhara has nurtured abundant species and carved a special history over the past 1,100 years.

According to folklore, Yusuhara’s history began with the Tsuno estate, a land cultivated by Fujiwara (later Tsuno) Tsunetaka in 913. The Tsuno clan settled down in the area and flourished as part of the seven ruling families of the Tosa Province, but they perished during the Warring States period. The family was eventually replaced by the Chosokabe clan and later the Yamauchi clan to govern the land.

Around the transition from the Edo period to Meiji, the area was called “Tsunoyamago”, with nine villages in existence. Along with the implementation of the municipal system, six towns were integrated in 1889 into what would become the town’s present area, first under the name of Nishi-tsuno village and later Yusuhara village. In 1966, Yusuhara town was born. Today, a half-century later, Yusuhara continues to evolve and add new dimensions to its rich and unique history.
A Forest for Introspection

D’où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? (Paul Gauguin, 1897)

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?
The sacred forests of Yusuhara beckon us to ask simple, grand questions.
Clear Streams Giving
Life to Nature

Rainwater falls into the deep forest and cascades into many streams, trickling down to the Yusuhara and Shimagawa Rivers and flowing into the Shimanto River, known as “the last clear stream of Japan”. The rich water keeps the land pristine and nurtures a variety of species living in Yusuhara.
Beyond the forest, a ridge offers a vast view that gives people new, broader perspectives.

This is the ridge where, at the end of the Edo period, patriots crossed and ventured off in the hope of seeing a new dawn.
A Home for Gods and Humans—
A land that connects mortals and mythology

To this day, the sacred music and dance of Tsunoyama kagura epitomises the spirit of shinjin waraku, or the world in which gods and humans harmoniously coexist.

This worldview of Yusuhara is reflected in the spirit of the people of this land who historically sought to head towards Takamagahara, a dwelling place of the heavenly gods.
The Story of Yusuhara

Fujiwara (Tsuno) Tsunetaka, who cultivated Yusuhara, was born into one of the most politically elite families of the Heian period, but he was driven away from Kyoto to Shikoku because of a conspiracy. Tsunetaka came to the land and, upon discovering water from a spring that reflected sunlight in the woods from atop a hill, drew water from the site and began building the Tsuno estate.

Gathering craftsmen with advanced skills from Iyo Province, he devoted himself to cultivating the land and working to transfer a divided tutelary deity to Mishima Shrine, where the Tsunoyama kagura (sacred music and dance) is performed to this day.

The traditions and foresight that Tsunetaka brought into the area from over 1,100 years ago remain an integral part of Yusuhara’s rich culture and continue to be passed on faithfully to future generations.

The people of Yusuhara have long been proud of their heritage as the descendants of Tsunetaka and the Fujiwara clan who served the Imperial Court and governed the region. The many tea cottages (chado) that remain today were built during the Edo period to enshrine the spirit of the Tsuno clan and various buddhas, eventually becoming places to welcome visitors and to gather and share information.

These historical roots are believed to have led to the “one village, serving the emperor” spirit, whereby villagers would unwaveringly support patriots who supported the emperor, at the end of the Edo period. Yusuhara remains in history as the town from which those patriots crossed the ridge and ventured off in the hope of seeing Japan’s new dawn.

The culture of Heian embodying the complete harmony of nature, humans and the gods blended perfectly into Yusuhara’s environment, with all of its natural beauty. The outlook on nature and humankind of shinjin waraku, or the state of the world in which gods and humans coexist, continues to blossom in the deep mountains of Yusuhara, in the form of the sacred music and dance of Tsunoyama kagura. The culture continues to nurture the spirit of the people of Yusuhara, who aspire to reach Takamagahara, the ideal place, or the dwelling place of the heavenly gods.

Yusuhara is a remote town yet is abundant in culture, with a history of nurturing and attracting prominent figures. Tsuno Yukitaka, a lord in the Muromachi period, was highly recognised by Shogun Ashikaga Yoshinori for his literary talent, while Gido Shushin and Zekkai Chushin, Zen priests born in the area, were leading figures of Gozan literature during the Middle Ages. More recently, the town has been connected with folklorist Tsuneichi Miyamoto, author Ryotaro Shiba, religious scholar Tetsuo Yamaori and architect Kengo Kuma.

It is from Yusuhara’s ridge that Sakamoto Ryoma set off in the hope of seeing the nation’s new dawn and Ryotaro Shiba envisaged a future for Japan with limitless possibilities. Who will be the next patriots to come with dreams inspired from this beautiful land?
Yusuhara × Kengo Kuma

In 1987, architect Kengo Kuma first visited Yusuhara to try to save the Yusuhara-za, a theatre that was about to be torn down. “I was surprised to find such a beautiful space of wooden architecture, hidden deep in the mountains,” he recalls. Thus, the Yusuhara-za, its silent voice reaching Kuma, was saved. His journey with wooden architecture, which eventually led to designs such as the new National Stadium for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, began with this small restoration project.

Today, buildings designed by Kuma are found across the town of Yusuhara: a hotel, a wooden bridge (gallery), the community market, a town hall, and a library and welfare facility.

“The Story Above the Clouds” of the town interwoven with Kuma’s architecture perhaps tells the story of Japan’s and humankind’s future. What was saved was not just the Yusuhara-za’s architecture, but ourselves: a page from the “Story” 100 years from now will surely be inscribed with such a line.

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Living as a part of nature: “Small architecture”

The "Small architecture" advocated by architect Kengo Kuma does not mean architecture that is small in scale. It is rather one that is made up of small, flexible units that can be stacked or woven and joined together, and that can be assembled and disassembled with ease.

This type of architecture has the freedom and flexibility of a system like the cells of a living creature. It is an architecture that "lives" as a part of nature, existing closely with its surrounding natural environment and nature’s cycles.

In contrast, modern civilisation has pursued "big architecture". It is a type of artefact that detaches humans from their surrounding environment, with heavy and large "units" and a hard, structured system.

"Small architecture" is a tool that gracefully connects humans with the environment and the world. It also challenges previous norms of architecture that try to dominate the environment, with no flexibility to be changed or moved, says Kuma.

This thinking is based on the relationship between humans and nature in which humans are a part of nature, and the unique worldview and aesthetic rooted in that bond, long nurtured by the Japanese people.

Kuma’s architecture, with its distinct presence, is one that reminds people of the sensibilities that one could attain from being a part of nature, almost a lost treasure even in Japan, and the related possibilities for innovation unique to Japan.

We want to build a town where you can live in peace and comfort all through life while feeling happy and fulfilled, with everyone respecting each other’s purpose in life—that is the town that we want to pass on to future generations.

The town Mr Yoshida endeavours to build is nothing special, in a way; it is an ideal that is sought universally and through history. Still, it is an “ideal” because it is so difficult to realise. And above all, Yusuhara is aiming for this ideal while stepping into the unknown, having to grapple with a string of challenges brought about by the world and society at a cross-roads, with such issues as global climate change, ageing populations and economic slowdown.

“We don’t have to look to achieve something extraordinary. People have wished for the same thing regardless of the time, and my mission is turn those ordinary wishes into reality. To do so, I need to be closely aware of how people live in the town, and at the same time, the changes that are taking place in the rest of the world.”

Looking Out to the Rest of the World

Though Yusuhara is a remote town, it has a unique history of developing and passing on the village with its broad perspective and spirit to achieve peace for all humankind. Embodying that spirit, Mayor Yoshida vowed immediately after taking office to make Yusuhara a place to take the lead in resolving global issues.

“The frog in the well knows nothing of the great ocean, as we say. We won’t be able to survive if we become ignorant of the world that we live in. We have a positive outlook on the fact that we have one of the fastest ageing populations in the world. We will tackle concerns shared globally and aim to become a model case for the rest of the world.”

The town plans to pursue policies that go beyond its own municipality and contribute to societies in Japan and the rest of the world. By doing so, it aims to achieve its own vision of tapping people and businesses from outside the town to reinvigorate the social life and economy in town.

What specific steps will be taken to realise Mayor Yoshida’s vision?

“First and foremost, we must restore strength in the town’s economy. Given the ageing population, we will need to proactively secure a healthy flow of people and businesses coming into our town. For this to take place, it is imperative that we improve infrastructure for tourism, such as lodging and mobility.”
Yusuhara’s vision may be a natural response to its circumstances, being located in the mountains of the Shikoku region, a place where the population decline is forecast to be the fastest in the country. With an ageing rate of 28%, Japan has the world’s most rapidly ageing population. The rate of ageing in Yusuhara is yet higher, at 44%.

But the vision alone cannot revitalise the town. It is crucial that the quality and variety of products and services offered in town be enriched. Visitors and residents alike need a greater number and variety of shops and restaurants in town to patronise so that more of their money stays in the town and helps to reinvigorate it.

Besides attracting and nurturing small businesses in town, Yusuhara must also find a new self-sustaining economic model to replace one that relies heavily on subsidies to municipalities, which are expected to shrink.

“Towns that are filled with the laughter of children and the elderly naturally attract people and bring happiness to the lives of those who gather. I believe sustainable prosperity of tourism and industry is keyed to the wellness of the town’s residents. We must thus tap into the knowledge of people inside and outside the town to continue to nurture a fulfilling life for the residents. We also want to build a new key industry around wellness that incorporates the history and culture of Yusuhara. By doing so, I would like to bring happiness to everyone in the best way that Yusuhara can and pass the baton on to future generations.”

Interview with Hisato Yoshida, Mayor of Yusuhara

“We will tackle concerns shared globally and aim to become a model case for the rest of the world.”
A Handy Guide to Yusuhara

Yusuhara, a hidden garden in Shikoku for unique wellness activities:
Witness authentic Japan and reconnect with nature

The Six Wards of Yusuhara

Yusuhara is a land filled with special artefacts that resulted from the worldview and aesthetics of people “living as a part of nature”, the nature-human relationship and wisdom of a kind that flourished in Japan before the Meiji Restoration. This legacy of coexisting with nature forms the background of the many wellness activities that visitors can enjoy in Yusuhara.

You can choose to stretch out to Matsubara, the beautiful and most southern part of Yusuhara, to re-discover a “mindful” self by walking through a beautiful pass that runs through the forest (Kubotani Therapy Road). Or, enjoy a countryside drive around Yusuhara and experience the diversity of nature that spreads across the southern slope of the Shikoku Mountains, ranging over 1,200 m in height. Or perhaps you would like to treat yourself to a relaxing drink or meal in one of Yusuhara’s beautiful cafes or restaurants after a soul-cleansing soak in the natural hot spring.

Whatever you choose, we hope that you will take away a variety of cues for better wellness in your everyday living, and be healthier and happier when you return home.

This guide is also available online:
http://www.town.yusuhara.kochi.jp/kanko/special-EN/
Kubotani Therapy Road

Kubotani Therapy Road, about 3 km in length, runs along a beautiful water channel in the forest. (The road is certified by the Forest Therapy Society to have proven therapeutic effects from the forest that contribute to mental and physical wellness.)

Kubotani Therapy Road, Matsubara, Yusuhara
✓ 40 mins by car from the town centre
✓ For car navigation, Matsubara Post Office is the nearest place recognised
   (Look for the bakery Chez-moi on R439, once you are near the area)
✓ For a local guide, call Matsubara Maroudo Society (0889-66-0133)

A Path in the Forest

There are many places remaining in Yusuhara that bring back “memories” of how Japanese people lived in the past. The water channel that has thrived in the forest for over 100 years is one such remnant of far-off days.

As you walk along the water, you hear the murmuring of a river from the bottom of the valley and the sounds of rustling leaves and birds overhead. You see a sketch of green and blue moss around the edges of the channel, and before long you are lured by the sweet smell drifting in the wind and you start to fade into the big, organic body of nature. While the man-made waterway itself blends into nature, it acts as a tool to affirm the biodiversity of the forest and serves to gracefully incorporate humans into the ecosystem.

In sharp contrast to man-made creations in other cultures that attempt to dominate or replace nature, artefacts in Japan typically not only harmonise with Mother Nature, but support it and thrive in it. The path in the forest reveals the essence of a civilisation particular to Japan, shaped by people who used to live with a sense of being an integral part of nature.
Yusuhara is home to a variety of special artefacts—that blend into nature, thrive in and support Mother Nature—that reveal the essence of the traditional Japanese civilisation, with a worldview and aesthetics rooted in nature, something that is becoming a lost treasure in Japan.

Experience the aesthetics of being a part of nature by visiting a variety of artefacts unique to Yusuhara, Japan

Yusuhara is home to a variety of special artefacts—that blend into nature, thrive in and support Mother Nature—that reveal the essence of the traditional Japanese civilisation, with a worldview and aesthetics rooted in nature, something that is becoming a lost treasure in Japan.
Kumo-no-Ue-no Swimming Pool
The building is made of Yusuhara’s cedar trees. Enjoy the luxury of swimming and then popping down to the hot spring next door!

Kumo-no-Ue-no Hot Spring
Enjoy Yusuhara’s special delight, a natural hot spring, with jacuzzi, herbal bath, sauna and open-air bath.
Food Innovation
A festive night with locally grown organic vegetables
(Food design by Yoshiko Hondo, for the Yusuhara Zadanaki, 8 September 2018)

Cafe Culture

Food and Drinks

Enrich life with a pause in Yusuhara’s beautiful cafes and soul-fulfilling local cuisine

Cafe Culture

COFFEE FLAG / Town centre
Chez-moi / Matsubura
Coffee Stand CANs Hütte / Tarogawa

Yusuhara Beef

For more Yusuhara delights:
http://www.town.yusuhara.kochi.jp/kanko/taburu/

*Please check the opening hours prior to your visit
Visitors to Yusuhara will find a variety of accommodations to suit their budget and tastes. The town boasts two hotels designed by renowned architect Kengo Kuma. The Kumo-no-Ue-no Hotel in Yusuhara is the first wooden building that he built. Located in Tarogawa, a few minutes away from the town centre, it offers guests a relaxing setting where they can enjoy an art gallery, hot spring and swimming pool.

While you are sleeping—
Stars falling and nature singing

For visitors who prefer to stay closer in, the hotel Marche Yusuhara, also designed by Kuma, is located right in the centre of town.

For guests seeking a different type of accommodation, the town operates a few environmental model-house facilities (a fully furnished house owned by the town for rent at a minimal rate, requiring prior application). Guest houses (rooms or entire homes rented by local residents) are also available in town, which will suit guests who’d like to get closer to the local life of Yusuhara.

For accommodations in Yusuhara:

http://www.town.yusuhara.kochi.jp/kanko/stay/
Travel tips

What to bring
✓ Please ensure that you bring plenty of warm clothing, as Yusuhara is located in the mountains. Summers tend to be cool (and even cold in the evenings regardless of the month), and winter months occasionally have heavy snowfall.
✓ Kindly note that few local shops and restaurants accept credit cards. ATMs are also currently limited and they do not provide 24-hour service.

Getting around
Please note that there is limited public transport service available in town. You might thus consider hiring a car at or around major airports to ensure your handy mobility in town. If you plan to drive around the town, please be aware that there are a number of narrow roads that are not wide enough for two vehicles to pass at the same time. Please drive slowly, and if you see a vehicle coming towards you in a narrow road, please give way to the coming vehicle by waiting at a point where the road is wide enough for two vehicles to pass.

Visiting shrines and temples
You are likely to come across picturesque shrines and temples during your stay in Yusuhara. These are home for kami (Shinto deities) and places where people visit to show their appreciation for ancestors, the gods, Buddha and all things in nature.

Given that these are not inherent touristic sites, when paying a visit to these places please give special attention to simple manners and etiquette—such as purifying yourself by washing hands and rinsing mouth with pure water before praying; refraining from taking pictures in prayer areas; and refraining from eating, drinking and smoking within the precincts except where expressly permitted.

Greetings
People in Yusuhara greet each other regularly, and this is also so with people that they might not know. Do join the local greeting culture and exchange ohayou gozaimasu (good morning), konnichiwa (hello) and oyasumi nasai (good night) with people around you.

Yusuhara × Richard Schulman

Yusuhara through the lens of Richard Schulman

Like Antoine Marie Jean-Baptiste Roger, comte de Saint-Exupéry.
Saint-Exupéry lore is that he traveled by plane to Brazil to an enigmatic land with Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier.
My journey to Yusuhara was a visit to a land forgotten ... but a Japanese land filled with history and love and folklore equal to the mysteries of Saint-Exupéry or grander in scale.
It was an architectural journey that delivered an unexpected experience ... an experience that revealed the rewards of a world apart, a world sublime.
Yusuhara’s Seasonal Scenes  Photos by Yoshiaki Tsuchiya

Spring

Summer

Fall

Winter