

YIDFF 2025 Special



Yamagata film festival to show world documentaries

The biennial Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), one of Asia's largest documentary film festivals, will be held in the city of Yamagata from Oct. 9 to 16.

A variety of programs, including two kinds of film competitions, will take place at various venues throughout the city, including Yamagata Central Public Hall, Yamagata Citizens' Hall, the Forum Yamagata movie theater, Yamagata Creative City Center Q1 and the former Yoshiike Clinic.

The capital of Yamagata Prefecture, reachable in three hours from Tokyo Station by shinkansen, becomes full of movie professionals and fans from all over the world during the week.

Yamagata is a place where film culture has long been deeply rooted. Forum Yamagata, established in 1984, was Japan's first citizen-funding movie theater.

In 1989, the city sought the advice of film director Shinsuke Ogawa when planning an event commemorating its centennial. At the time, he was based in the adjacent city of Kaminoyama, where he was producing documentaries. He proposed holding a film festival focused on documentaries, which at the time had very few opportunities for theater screenings in Japan. In response to his call, local young people volunteered to help run the festival, contributing greatly to its success.

This spirit is still carried on today, with about 250 volunteers — primarily from the

city of Yamagata but also from both inside and outside the prefecture — coming together to support the festival.

More than 22,000 people from around the world visit the YIDFF on average. During the festival, especially on the weekend of Oct. 11 and 12, which will be followed by a national holiday, local accommodations are likely to fill up early, so it is recommended to stay in a nearby city with good access and visit the festival during the day. For example, it takes only an hour to get from Sendai in Miyagi Prefecture to Yamagata by bus. On weekends and holidays, over 15 buses run from Sendai to Yamagata Station in the morning alone, with return service available until around 9:30 p.m.

One of the festival's competitions is the International Competition, which this year received 1,318 entries from 129 countries. Of these, 15 will be screened and judged during the festival, with five winners selected.

One of the 15 films is "Time to the Target" by the Ukrainian film director Vitaly Mansky. His hometown is Lviv, a city that, despite its distance from the front lines, has been repeatedly attacked by Russia. The film documents the town over a period of a year and a half.

The other competition is New Asian Currents, which received a record-high 1,358 submissions from 75 countries. Of these, 20 films will be screened and judged during the festival, and three will receive awards. Two of the 20 films were created by female directors from Afghanistan. Zainab Entezar directed



YIDFF 2023 Awards Ceremony YAMAGATA INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

"Shot the Voice of Freedom," and Najiba Noori and Rasul Noori directed "Writing Hawa." Both films depict the suffering of women under the revived Taliban rule.

Special programs include Unscripted: The Art of Direct Cinema, which explores the experimental documentary production methods that originated in the U.S. in the 1960s, and Palestine — Memory of the Land, which focuses on the tragic history of Palestine and the continuing hardships in the region.

Yamagata and Film contains records from the inaugural film festival. While some of these were published in the 1991 documentary "A Movie Capital," this new collection brings together and digitizes parts that have never been before made public. View People

View Cities — The World of UNESCO Creative Cities 2025 features seven films from cities from around the world, including Kathmandu in Nepal and Lodz in Poland, that have been members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, which Yamagata has also been part of since 2017. There will also be screenings of four new works from the Yamagata Renaissance Project, focusing on the city's people, history and culture.

The YIDFF secretariat commented, "We aim to continue serving as a film festival that highlights small, often overlooked voices, bringing diverse range of documentary films from around the world to audiences and providing people with fresh encounters with both films and other people."

Yamagata city

Yamagata: Mountain gods and snow monsters

Yamagata Prefecture, located on the Sea of Japan side of the Tohoku region, is mostly mountainous, with rich nature and ample snowfall making it ideal for winter sports. Yamagata has many charms that Tokyo lacks and is easily accessible from the capital, with the Yamagata Shinkansen connecting Tokyo and Yamagata stations in about three hours.

The Zao Mountains, on the border with Miyagi Prefecture, boast breathtaking beauty. This range, running north to south through the Tohoku region, is scenic in every season: the fresh green of spring, the brilliant sunshine and intense blue sky of summer, the rich colors of autumn and the snowscapes of winter.

At the foot of the mountains is Zao Onsen, a strongly acidic sulfur hot spring with a history of 1,900 years, located about 40 minutes by bus from Yamagata Station. The nearby Zao Ropeway, running from Zao Sanroku Station, offers magnificent views.

In October, the autumn leaves are most beautiful. Winter offers skiing and views of countless dazzling-white frost-covered trees.

In a rare phenomenon, supercooled water carried by winter winds instantly freezes onto Maries' fir trees, eventually turning them into giant, pure-white "snow monsters." The fully formed snow monsters can be seen from late December to early March, but in early winter the contrast between the green needles of the fir trees and the pure white of the ice and snow that gradually dress them is breathtakingly beautiful as well.

A popular way to view the snow monsters is to take the Zao Ropeway's Sanroku Line from Zao Sanroku Station and then switch to the Sancho Line from Juhyo Kogen Station to the mountaintop Jizo Sancho Station, where right outside lies a vast field of snow monsters.

When the snow monsters are illuminated in

the evening, the magical view is like something out of a fantasy world. From Juhyo Kogen Station, you can also take a special Night Cruiser snow vehicle on a 75-minute nighttime tour.

The Zao Onsen Ski Resort's Juhyogen Course also offers you a place to ski or snow-board while admiring the snow monsters.

Yamadera: A mountain temple

Another must-visit in Yamagata Prefecture is the Risshakuji temple, widely known as Yamadera, meaning "mountain temple." Founded in 860 by the renowned monk Jikaku Daishi (Ennin), this Tendai sect temple is easily accessible from Yamadera Station, a 20-minute ride from Yamagata Station.

At the top of the 1,015 steps from the trail-head lies the temple Okunoin, which consists of Nyohodo and Daibutsuden. Nyohodo enshrines statues of Shaka Nyorai (Shakya-muni Buddha) and Taho Nyorai (the Buddha of Abundant Treasures), while Daibutsuden houses a 5-meter-tall golden statue of Amida Nyorai (Amitabha Buddha).

Along the path to Okunoin, one can see over 30 temples and pagodas of various sizes, including Konponchudo Hall, an Important Cultural Property that is considered the oldest beechwood structure in Japan, gates such as the Sanmon ("mountain gate") and Niomon, which houses statues of guardians of Buddha, and countless giant rocks. The Godaido Hall, built atop a towering rock, is the best lookout point at Yamadera, offering a breathtaking view.

A monument engraved with the haiku poem "Shizukesa ya iwa ni shimiiru, semi no koe" ("In the quietude, the call of cicadas seeps into the rocks") also stands here. This verse, deeply familiar to Japanese people, was composed by the famous Edo Period poet Matsuo Basho when he visited Yamadera in 1689 during his



Yamagata City

• **From Sendai**
1hr.

• **From Tokyo**
1.5 hr.
2.5 hr.

*All times approximate

Yamagata city is easily accessible by plane and bullet train from Tokyo, and only an hour away from Sendai.
YAMAGATA CITY

Jikaku Daishi (Ennin) practiced among the distinctive cloud-shaped erosion marks at the Tarumizu Ruins, inspiring him to make Yamadera his base for spreading Tendai Buddhism throughout the Tohoku area.

YAMAGATA CITY



journey through the Tohoku region. It was later included in his masterpiece travelogue, "Okuno Hosomichi" ("The Narrow Road to the Interior").

The entire pilgrimage route, which involves climbing and descending stone steps to visit all these places, takes about an hour and a half.

A guided tour in English is available upon prior booking on the Yamadera Tourism Association's website, enabling foreign visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the history and local culture.

On the streets at the base of Yamadera, visitors can enjoy famous local specialties such as soba noodles, *imoni* and Yamadera *chikara konnyaku*. Imoni, a traditional stew, is the "soul food" of autumn in Yamagata Prefecture. There are regional variations, but the most well-known version is a soy sauce-based soup with taro, thinly sliced beef, *konnyaku* — a gelatin made by grating and solidifying konnyaku yams — and green onions. It is not only eaten at home, but also enjoyed at *imoni kai* commu-

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'The other side of the mountain.'

- Edwin O. Reischauer (U.S. ambassador to Japan, 1961 to 1966)



CITY of YAMAGATA

Yamagata city

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nity gatherings with neighbors and friends held along riverbanks. Yamadera chikara konnyaku is small balls of konnyaku simmered in a soy sauce-based broth and served on a skewer.
From late October to early November, visitors can enjoy the dynamic contrast between the vibrant autumn leaves and the rugged rock faces.

Stunning fall foliage
There are also places to enjoy beautiful autumn foliage in central Yamagata city. *Momiji Park*, located about a 25-minute walk from Yamagata Station, or a little over 10 minutes by bus, is, as its name suggests, a garden filled with momiji maple trees. Though it is small at about 0.7 hectares, it has a history of over 350 years.

The park is designed around a central pond, allowing visitors to appreciate the beauty of the trees and water from various angles. The best time for viewing autumn leaves is typically mid- to late November, when the red and yellow leaves reflect on the pond's surface, creating a stunning "mirror foliage" effect.
On the opposite side of Yamagata Station from Momiji Park is Kajo Park, where the autumn foliage is also beautiful, with cherry, ginkgo and other trees changing colors at different times. This park was built around the ruins of Yamagata Castle, a National Historic Site. The park's area is roughly the size of eight Tokyo Domes. There are various cultural facilities within and around the park, including the Yamagata Prefectural Museum, the Yamagata Museum of Art and the Mogami Yoshiaki Historical Museum.
The park also contains the Yamagata City Local History Museum, a relocated and restored form of the Old Saiseikan Hospital Building, built in pseudo-Western style by Japanese craftsmen during the Meiji Era. This historical structure, designated an Important Cultural Property, features a mix of both Western and Japanese architectural elements.

Western-Style Elegance at Bunshokan
Another building incorporating Western-style architecture is the Yamagata Prefecture Home-town Pavilion Bunshokan (former prefectural office and assembly building). It is located about a 10-minute bus ride from Yamagata Station and admission is free. It is a brick building of the English neo-Renaissance style, built in 1916 and designated an Important Cultural Property in 1984. From 1986, the building and its interior underwent a 10-year restoration project, using the same construction methods from when it was originally built. Visitors can appreciate its beautiful architecture and exhibit its showcasing the records of the restoration work and the region's history and culture. The building and its garden are also used for various cultural activities, including concerts, plays, exhibitions and local events.

Savoring the flavors of Yamagata
The city also has many places to enjoy Yamagata's local specialties. Next to the Yamagata Tourism Information Center, just a one-minute walk from Yamagata Station, there is the Yamagata sake tasting corner Chetto, a spot where visitors can sample local sake. With 42 varieties always available, people can enjoy tasting at a reasonable price: three small cups for ¥500 (\$3.50) or six for ¥1,000. Yamagata Prefecture has long been renowned for sake brewed using the pure water flowing from its mountains and the rice grown in its fertile plains. The prefecture still has 48 sake breweries today. Sake from no two breweries tastes the same — because the qualities of the water differ from place to place, the flavors and aromas of the sake produced are incredibly diverse.
During the upcoming cold seasons, enjoying local sake with local seafood would be a great idea, while the wagyu brand Yamagata Beef can be enjoyed all through the year. Among agricultural products, peaches, apples, certain kinds of grapes and pears — including Western pears, of which Yamagata is the top producer



Japan's No. 1 *imoni* festival, held every September, serves about 30,000 portions of imoni cooked in a giant 6.5-meter pot. YAMAGATA CITY TOURISM ASSOCIATION



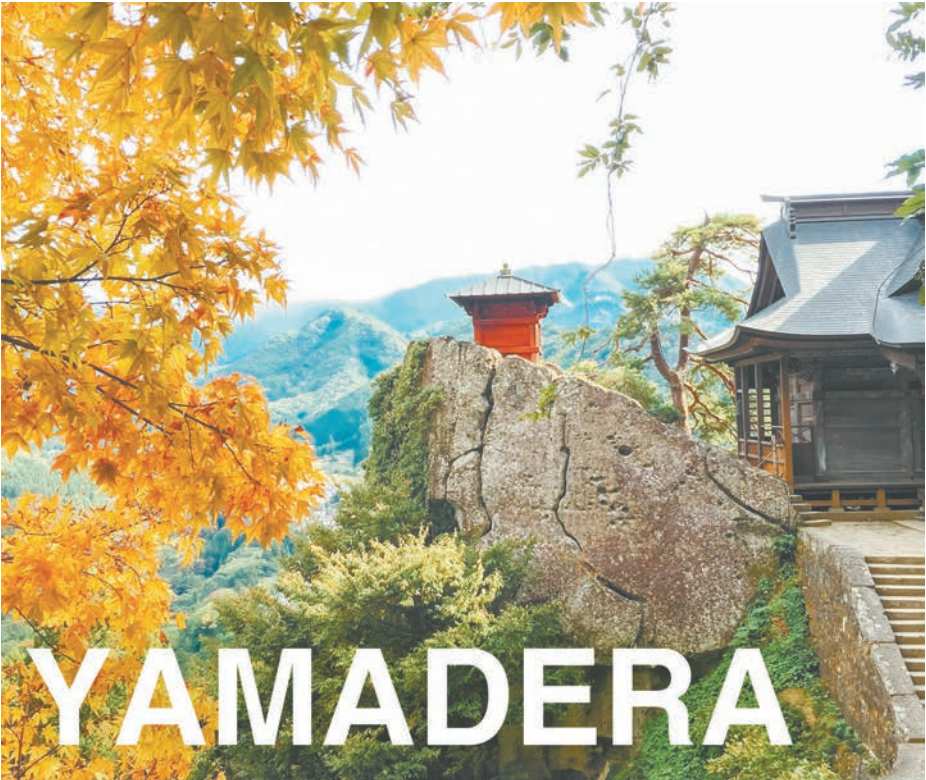
The Bunshokan, a brick building constructed in 1916 that was formerly used as the prefectural government building, is a National Cultural Property. YAMAGATA CITY



Yamagata city ranked first in average household ramen consumption for three years in a row, truly earning its title of the ramen capital of Japan. YAMAGATA CITY



in Japan — are in season. The prefecture also has an overwhelming share of domestic cherry production. Even in early summer, ahead of the peak season, processed cherry goods and cherry-flavored sweets are popular souvenirs.
Another thing Yamagata city boasts as No. 1 in Japan is average household spending on ramen. Interestingly, many soba shops also serve ramen. It is said that this tradition dates back to the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. Ramen chefs in affected areas fled to Yamagata and found work at soba restaurants, which then added their

ramen techniques.
Yamagata city is focusing efforts on drawing visitors for its ramen as well. Feb. 8 is officially Yamagata City Ramen Day, and various ramen-related events are held around that time. The city's Oshi-Men Yamagata website (ramen lovers' portal) allows users to search for ramen shops based on their preferences for broth flavors and noodle types.
Filled with nature, history, culture and food, Yamagata is brimming with attractions that will satisfy both the interests and appetites of its visitors.





YAMADERA

Your Bridge to Yamadera:
Guided in English,
Rooted in Local Insight



ZAO ONSEN

Immerse Yourself in History, Be Healed by Nature



Democrat vs. Republican

America vs. China

White vs. Black

Economy vs. Ecology

Wealth vs. Health

Urban vs. Rural

Government vs. People

Dogs vs. Cats

Coffee vs. Tea

Man vs. Woman

Monopoly vs. Share

Privacy vs. Surveillance

Politics vs. Science

Think vs. Do

Reject vs. Embrace

You vs. Me

Argument vs. Dialogue

Where there's division,
there's an opportunity for progress.

#BeyondVS

Dialogue matters.

thejapan^{times}