

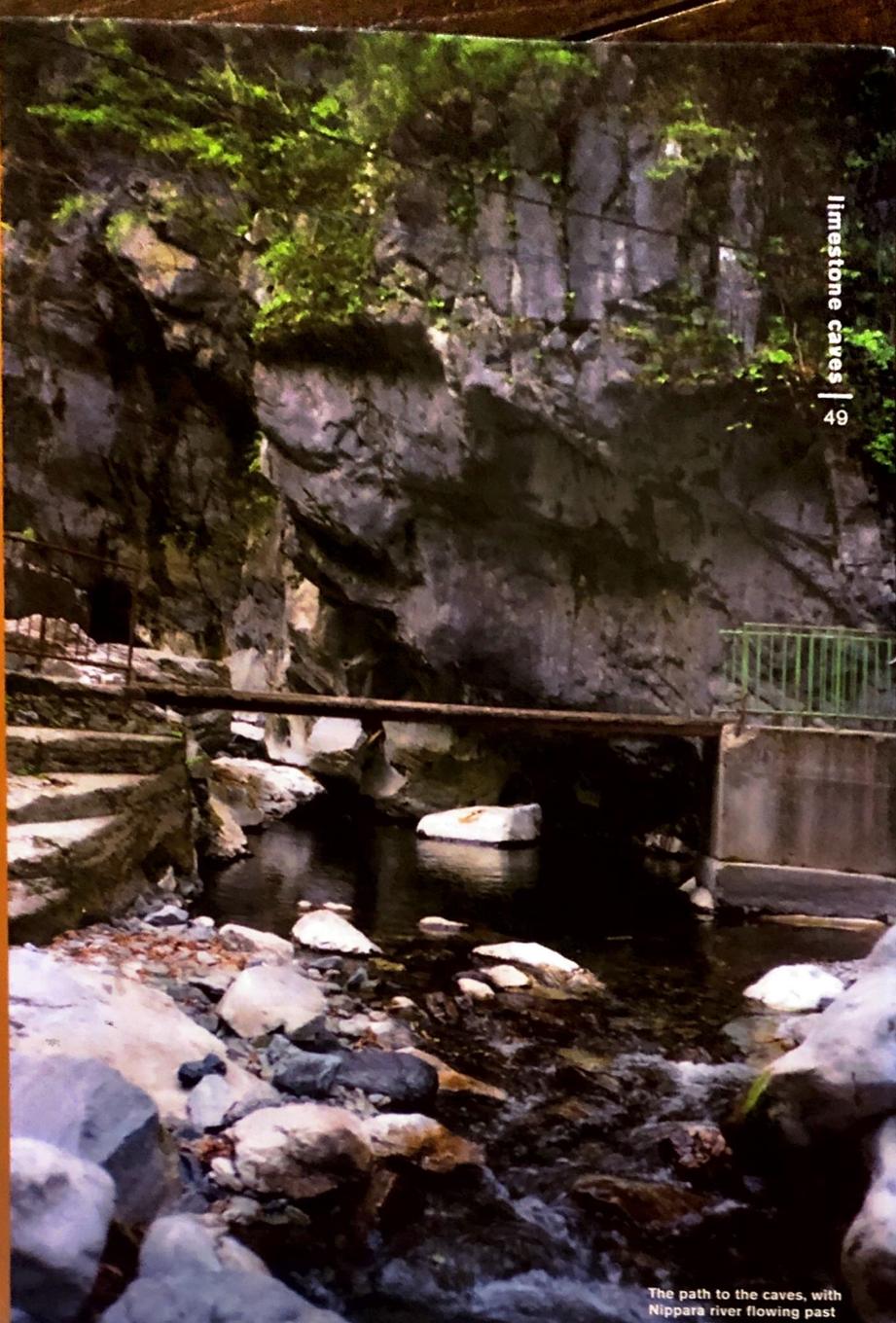
# Spelunking in the Suburbs: **A Journey to the Nippara Limestone Caves**

by Benjamin Freeland

Japan's capital city is a decidedly odd place. Usually pegged as the world's most populous city, it still manages to feel positively provincial in places, even well within the 23-ku periphery, and the further into the western reaches of Tokyo Prefecture one goes, the less relation any of it bears to the bright lights of Shinjuku, Ginza and elsewhere.



Path to cave with Iseki Shrine in view



The path to the caves, with Nippara river flowing past

It has been noted that Tokyo is the world's only capital with an active volcano within city limits – technically true given that the Kazan (Volcano) island chain located far to the south is administered as part of the capital territory. It is also well worth noting that Tokyo features a national park within its boundaries, and not hidden away on some island exclave but right in old Edo's western backyard. Chichibu-Tama National Park was founded in the interwar years and is shared by Tokyo and the prefectures of Saitama, Yamanashi and Nagano, with the southeastern section located in western Tokyo Prefecture, generally known as Okutama.

It is here in the picturesque Nippara River Valley that one of the country's most spectacular geological formations can be found, the Nippara Limestone Caves (Nippara sh ny d). While Japan is replete with caves and other interesting geological phenomena, the Nippara Caves are well worth seeing, not only for their geological beauty but also for the Buddhist icons hidden within, left behind by the yamabushi,

mountain mystics who for centuries sought sanctuary in its darkened chambers.

While technically still located in Tokyo, the area surrounding the Nippara Caves feels as far removed from the metropolis as, say, Hokkaido. Getting to the caves from the center of town takes the better part of three hours and involves a series of train and bus transfers at progressively smaller towns and stations. The JR line terminates at Okutama Station, the quaint little gateway to the park, from where one takes a bus to Nippara Village, which is beyond quaint and probably would have disappeared off the map long ago had it not been for tourism in the area.

Residents here are decidedly cut off from the trappings of city life; any serious shopping necessitates an hour-long trip east to Ome, itself hardly a major center. The beauty of the area, however, is truly stunning – presumably what keeps the village's handful of residents from moving

elsewhere – and the twenty-minute walk from the village bus stop to the caves means a delightful stroll along a mountain road with no noise – barring the occasional motor vehicle – apart from the rushing river below and the chirping of the area's ubiquitous uguisu, or Japanese bush warbler. The region is rich with wildlife, with bears being a frequent (and worrisome) presence, in addition to sizable monkey, wild boar, deer and tanuki (Japanese raccoon-dog) populations.

The Nippara Caves have been known about for quite a long time, probably since the 3rd century, at which time the area around them was uninhabited. By the Heian Period the caves had become a sanctuary for the yamabushi, most of them followers of the esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism, a colorful tradition replete with mystical practices inherited from Tibet and elsewhere. Kamakura-period frontiersman Harashima Isogu is credited with opening up the region in the late 12th century, with the town of Nippara founded in around 1200. However, it remained largely the domain of itinerant priests for many centuries and was largely inaccessible to the public until the opening of the Ome Electric Railway in the early 20th century, which coincided with the growth of domestic tourism in Japan and the opening up of the Hakone and Tanazawa regions.

The Oku-tama region has since become a popular fishing and hiking destination, with other attractions including Oku-tama Lake, Mount Kumotori and Mount Mitake, all a stone's throw away from Oku-tama Station. The Nippara Caves are among the lesser known of the region's attractions, which is perhaps a blessing inasmuch as excessive tourism would invariably wreak havoc on the caves' delicate water-sculpted contours and centuries-old Buddhist icons.

At over 300 meters deep and over three kilometers long in its entirety, the Nippara Caves represent a series of narrow passageways which open up into various chambers, of which the upper (younger) chambers are the more geologically spectacular, replete with impressive stalactites and stalagmites and flowstone formations, and the lower (older) sections are where the caves' religious icons are to be found.

The lower chambers bear ethereal names such as Kobo Daishi Gakumonsho (Place of the Wisdom of Kobo Daishi – named after the iconic founder of the Shingon sect better known to the world as Kukai), Mizukoto Kutsu (Water Koto Cave – so named because the dripping water within makes an echoing sound akin to the plucking of a stringed instrument), and Amida-no-Hara (Plateau of the Amida Buddha), which leads into the chamber of the Twelve Medicine Buddhas (Juu-Ni Yakushi).

The lower section opens up into an enormous grotto known as the 13 Buddha Cave, overlooked by a striking stone carving of Kannon, the female Bodhisattva of Compassion, a prominent figure in the Shingon pantheon. To reach the upper chambers, one climbs a series of very steep metal staircases into the still-forming "new caves," a treasure trove of stalactites, stalagmites, flowstone, draperies and gypsum flowers. The upper sections are extensively illuminated and accessible only through a network of chain-link passageways designed to protect the caves' delicate formations from human hands. The caves maintain a yearlong temperature of 11 degrees centigrade making them an appealing escape from the summer heat, and in the past a warm retreat for the yamabushi in the dead of winter.

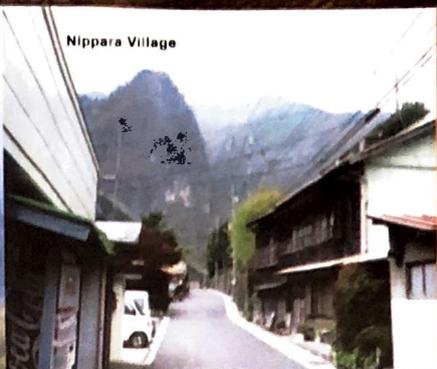
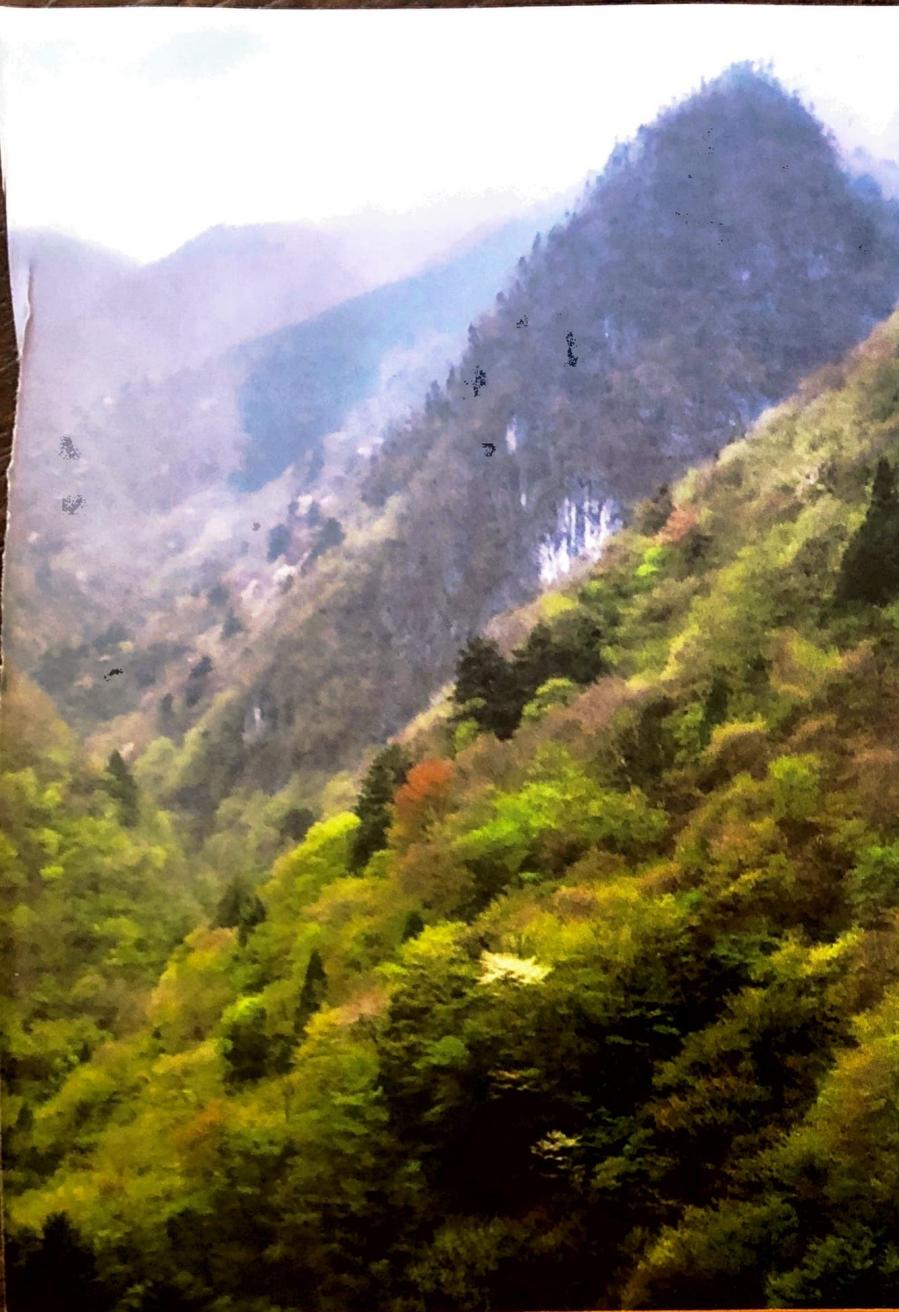
In sum, the Nippara Limestone Caves make for an intriguing but physically easy and undemanding daytrip from the capital, though for those interested in a more heavy-duty spelunking experience, expeditions into deeper passages yet unopened to regular visitors can be organized. As there is some climbing involved, sturdy comfortable shoes are a must, and as the caves are rather drippy, a hat of some sort is a good idea. Surrounded by stunning wilderness and conveniently located in Tokyo's western backyard, the Nippara Caves are not to be missed, at once a dazzling display of geology in action and a testament to one of Japan's most fascinating spiritual traditions. *tj*



Nippara River Valley

Turn right to the caves





limestone caves



Flowstone

Iseki Shrine, overlooking the opening of the caves

