

TAKE A TOUR Valley of the dolls

Nagoro, Iya Valley, Shikoku, Japan



Sarah Reid has a passion for offbeat destinations. Scarecrows still give her the creeps.

I have always found scarecrows a bit creepy, so the Japanese village of Nagoro, deep in the misty mountains of central Shikoku, wasn't at the top of my must-visit list, but curiosity gets the better of me. Also known as "Scarecrow Village", this hamlet in the Iya Valley is known for its 300-odd kakashi (scarecrows) – that's more than 11 scarecrows to each of its 27 residents.

A group of scarecrows waits patiently at the village bus stop, while others rise out of Nagoro's overgrown gardens. There are baby scarecrows in prams, and older scarecrows with spectacles and walking sticks. With some beginning to hunch over as they slowly rot, the scene sufficiently creeps me out. Yet Nagoro's scarecrow story is actually quite heartwarming.

It began two decades ago, our guides tell us, when Nagoro local Tsukimi

Ayano made a scarecrow in her father's image for the family vegetable plot. Nagoro's population had already begun to collapse as residents left to pursue opportunities in Japan's urban centres. As her neighbours continued to leave or die of old age, Tsukimi's hobby morphed into a memorial-like project as she made scarecrows in the likeness of people she knew so she could still "speak" to them.

We meet Tsukimi, now 74, in her driveway. "I'm so happy that people come to see them," she says when we compliment her handiwork, and invites us into her humble home, where her living room doubles as a shrine to her favourite scarecrow, lovingly crafted in the image of her mother. While she still speaks to her scarecrows, Tsukimi now has real people to chat to as more tourists visit the remote Iya Valley each year.

It's comforting to receive visitors, Tsukimi adds, as local residents continue to dwindle. Similar to the plight of other ageing Japanese villages, there are no more children in Nagoro. Its abandoned elementary school has transformed into a scarecrow museum, its classrooms filled with childlike scarecrows propped up behind the rows of desks.

With no restaurants or hotels in the one-street town, a visit to Nagoro is typically combined with other Iya Valley attractions. On our tour with Oku Travel, we gingerly cross a historic vine bridge spanning the gin-clear Iya River (now reinforced with steel rope),

and visit the pretty terraced village of Ochiai, known for its unique system of sustainable farming.

The Iya Valley is also home to Japan's only thermal bath reached by funicular. Better yet, the Hotel Iyaonsen's unique onsen is open to non-guests. Ahh.

The writer travelled as a guest of Oku Japan.

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- The island of Shikoku is also known for its 1200km Shikoku Pilgrimage route linking 88 temples.

- Oku Japan visits the Iya Valley on guided and self-guided itineraries.

okuJapan.com

- Iyanoyado Kazuraya, a traditional ryokan (guesthouse), makes an atmospheric base for exploring the Iya Valley.

ianoyado-kazuraya.com

Photography: Sarah Reid (scarecrows)



Scarecrows in the village of Nagoro greet visitors at the bus stop. Right: A historic vine bridge crosses the Iya River.

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