

The Raifuku Forest Story

A Forest Nurtured by the Mountains, Cared for by People

Introduction

Hidden in the mountains of Okuhida, about 1,000 meters above sea level, lies the quiet village of Fukuchi Onsen.

At first glance, it is simply another beautiful hot spring village in Japan.

But if you spend a little time here, you begin to notice something different.

The forests.

The silence.

The old festivals.

The mountain paths.

The people who greet you with genuine warmth.

Little by little, you realize that this village has been living with nature, not against it, for hundreds of years.

Raifuku Forest was born from that way of life.

This is not the story of a tourist attraction.

It is the story of a mountain village, a forgotten forest, and the people who continue to shape each other across generations.

Chapter One

Where the Mountains Created a Village

Fukuchi Onsen is surrounded by some of Japan's most dramatic volcanic landscapes.

Mount Yake, one of the country's active volcanoes, rises nearby. Summers are cool, while winters bring heavy snowfall and temperatures that often fall below -15° C (5° F).

Life has never been easy here.

Yet people have chosen to live in these mountains for centuries.

The land itself tells their story.

Coral and trilobite fossils found around Fukuchi reveal that these mountains were once beneath the sea. Over millions of years, volcanic eruptions and tectonic forces lifted the ocean floor into the Japanese Alps.

When we dug a well beside our small forest lodge, Dogu Banya, we discovered layers of volcanic ash left by ancient eruptions. Beneath them lay limestone formed in an ancient ocean. The water rising through these layers is naturally rich in minerals—a rare hard water in Japan.

Everything here—the mountains, the forests, the hot springs, and the people—shares the same origin.

Over time, the villagers learned to live with these mountains.

They prayed.

They celebrated.

They passed down traditional dances from one generation to the next.

Even today, children begin learning these performances while they are still young, continuing traditions that have survived for centuries.

As Japan modernized, Fukuchi also changed.

Farming gave way to silk production.

Forestry supported the local economy.

Eventually, hot spring inns transformed the village into a welcoming destination for travelers.

Today, Fukuchi faces new challenges.

Its population is aging.

Tourism has changed.

The village is searching for new ways to thrive while protecting the spirit that has always defined it.

Chapter Two

A Forest That Never Forgot

Raifuku Forest was not always a forest.

Long ago, this land is believed to have been hidden rice fields, created to protect families from heavy taxation during the Edo Period.

Stone walls from those terraces still remain beneath the trees.

Later, the land became mulberry fields for raising silkworms.

Then came the hot spring era.

Pipelines carrying thermal water once crossed this land, helping build the village's first inns.

In 1969, my grandfather purchased this property.

No one in my family knows exactly why.

Perhaps he dreamed of building something.

Perhaps he simply believed in this place.

Whatever his reason, the land was never developed.

For nearly fifty years, the forest slept.

Bamboo grass grew thick.

Trees fell.

People stopped walking here.

But nature never stopped growing.

When forest ecologists later surveyed the site, they discovered an extraordinary diversity of native trees, wildflowers, edible plants, birds, and wildlife.

Raifuku Forest had not been abandoned.

It had simply been waiting.

Chapter Three

A Question My Grandfather Left Behind

In 2020, everything changed with a single phone call.

The electric company informed me that dangerous trees might fall onto nearby power lines.

As the landowner, I needed to visit the property.

It had been many years since I had walked there.

Cutting through dense bamboo grass, I suddenly stepped into a quiet open forest.

Birdsong.

Running water.

Sunlight filtering through the leaves.

I remember thinking,

"This place is too beautiful to remain forgotten."

That moment changed my life.

I began clearing trails.

Removing dangerous trees.

Building a small forest lodge.

Meeting local people.

Working alongside the Hidakuma team.

Little by little, the sleeping forest welcomed people once again.

But another journey had also begun.

A question.

Why did my grandfather buy this land?

I still do not know the answer.

Perhaps I never will.

Yet every time I walk these trails, I feel I come a little closer.

Chapter Four

What Fukuchi Taught Me

As I spent more time in Fukuchi, I realized that the village itself was teaching me.

Whenever I hurried through town preparing events, someone would stop and ask,

"What's happened?"

Just a simple question.

Yet every time, it reminded me to slow down.

To breathe.

To smile.

Before coming here, I had rarely experienced such natural kindness.

Then I understood.

People survive long winters by looking after one another.

They clear snow together.

They maintain the shrines together.

They preserve their festivals together.

The forest follows the same rhythm.

Trees live for centuries.

People live for only a fraction of that time.

A healthy forest can never be created by one person.

It is passed from generation to generation.

That is exactly how Fukuchi has endured.

Its industries have changed.

Its people have changed.

But its connections have remained.

Fukuchi taught me that caring for a forest is, above all, caring for relationships.

Chapter Five

A Story That Will Never Be Finished

Raifuku Forest is not a completed place.

It never will be.

Within this forest remain hidden rice terraces, mulberry trees, traces of the hot spring village, and a mountain shrine reached by an old forest path.

Every generation has left something behind.

Our role is not to preserve the forest exactly as it is.

Our role is to carry it forward.

Children may build small crafts from branches and pinecones.

Families may cook with wild mountain vegetables gathered nearby.

Visitors may spend an afternoon reading quietly beneath the trees.

Others may watch films under the stars, walk together to the mountain shrine, or simply follow the footprints of deer through fresh winter snow.

Perhaps local residents will gather at Dogu Banya over tea before saying,

"Shall we head into the forest for a while?"

Perhaps today's children will return one day with children of their own.

Perhaps someone who visited from another country will wonder,

"I wonder how that little forest in Japan is doing."

Those small connections are what will shape this forest over the next hundred years.

I still do not know why my grandfather bought this land.

Perhaps I never will.

But I have learned that the answer is less important than the journey of searching.

Each conversation.

Each trail repaired.

Each person who joins us.

Each new story.

Together, they become Raifuku Forest.

This forest is not built by one person.

It belongs to everyone who cares enough to become part of its story.

And that story is still being written.

Closing

Raifuku Forest is not a destination.

It is an invitation.

An invitation to slow down.

To listen to the forest.

To discover how a small mountain village has lived alongside nature for generations.

And perhaps, to leave behind something meaningful for the generations yet to come.

Like the forest itself, the story of Raifuku Forest will never be finished.

It will continue to grow with everyone who walks its paths.