

Michi-no-Eki Where You Can Experience Panning for Gold Dust



Tramcar for transporting gold ore displayed in the underground museum

In Nakatsue Village*¹ in Hita City, located in the western part of Oita Prefecture, there is a *Michi-no-Eki* where visitors can experience panning for gold dust. We hear from the manager of the *Michi-no-Eki*, situated in an area that was once Japan's leading gold mining site in terms of annual production, to learn about its distinctive features. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



Photo: PIXTA

In the 2002 Japan-Korea co-hosted FIFA World Cup, Nakatsue Village served as the training camp for the Cameroon national team. The village's connection to this international sporting event is evident even at the *Michi-no-Eki*, where the national flag of Cameroon is displayed at the front of the building as a commemoration of the event.

Taio Gold Mine (Taio Kinzan) started gold mining in the late 19th century and developed into one of Japan's leading gold mines. The total length of its tunnels extended to approximately 110 kilometers, and by 1938, it became the largest gold mine in Japan, producing around 2.3 tons of gold annually. Until its closure in 1972, the village experienced a sort of "gold rush," with movie theaters, restaurants, and other establishments bustling around the area.

After its closure, the mine tunnels were transformed into a museum, and the surrounding area was developed into a campground. In 2000, it reopened as "*Michi-no-Eki Taio Kinzan*."

As Yamaguchi Kosei, the Director of Taio Kinzan Tourism Management Office, says, "The most distinctive and appealing aspect of this *Michi-no-Eki* is its underground museum that recreates the former gold mine's tunnels, providing visitors with a chance to explore its history. Within the mining zone, visitors can witness the remnants of mining activities and learn about the techniques employed. A particular



Left: The Michi-no-Eki offers a wide range of processed products made from local specialties such as wasabi and yuzu.

Center: The barley shochu under the Taio Kinzan brand is infused with gold leaf.

Right: Bath powder is packaged in containers resembling old Japanese gold coins for souvenirs.



Left: Glistening at the bottom of the pan are tiny grains of gold, which can be placed in small bottles for visitors to take home as a souvenir.

Above right: Using a dedicated pan for gold panning, individuals scoop a blend of water and sand, employing a gentle swaying motion to gradually separate the two in order to find real gold.

Below: Visitors can observe a pile of real sand gold dust.



Above: A panoramic view of the Michi-no-Eki, nestled among the surrounding mountains.

Below: A sign displaying "Modern Industrial Heritage" is prominently displayed at the entrance of the underground museum.



standout is the 'tatekou'², a vertical shaft that plunges to a depth of 510 meters, offering a truly impressive view when looking down from the top."

"Interestingly, the name 'Taio' in 'Taio Kinzan' actually translates to the idea of 'birthplace of sea bream' in Japanese, and we had an exhibit featuring symbolic solid gold sea bream figurines, which were very well received. Unfortunately, they were stolen, and although we now have replicas on display, we hope that visitors can still imagine the gleam of the original pure gold pieces. I also highly recommend trying the sand gold panning experience. Searching for authentic specks of gold hidden in the sand, though small, captivates both adults and children alike," Yamaguchi shares.



Sea bream replicas gleaming in gold

"In addition to the museum, the souvenir shop is also a must-visit. Here, you can find

products like mayonnaise infused with wasabi, one of Nakatsue Village's specialty items. Wasabi, a native Japanese plant grown in clean mountain streams in rural areas, is an essential spice in Japanese cuisine, often grated and served with sashimi³. We even have a unique soft-serve ice cream with the distinctive spiciness of wasabi. I encourage you to try it at least once," adds Yamaguchi.

Another specialty product is "yuzukosho" made with yuzu, a type of citrus commonly used in Japanese cuisine to add fragrance and color to various dishes by grating only the outer skin. Yuzukosho is created by grinding together green yuzu zest, green chili pepper, and salt, resulting in a refreshing and aromatic spiciness.

Visitors can reflect on the area's historical connection to gold while partaking in gold panning and indulging in these distinctive local products. **7**

1. In 2005, due to a wide-scale merger, Nakatsue Village in Hita District became a part of Hita City, yet the name of Nakatsue Village was retained.
2. A vertical tunnel structure established from the surface into underground mines or coal mines for the purpose of transporting minerals, materials, and personnel, as well as for ventilation.
3. Japan has a longstanding herb and spice culture, utilizing plants that have been indigenous or cultivated in Japan for various culinary purposes. Representative examples include perilla, Japanese pepper, ginger, as well as unique Japanese ingredients such as mitsuba and wasabi.