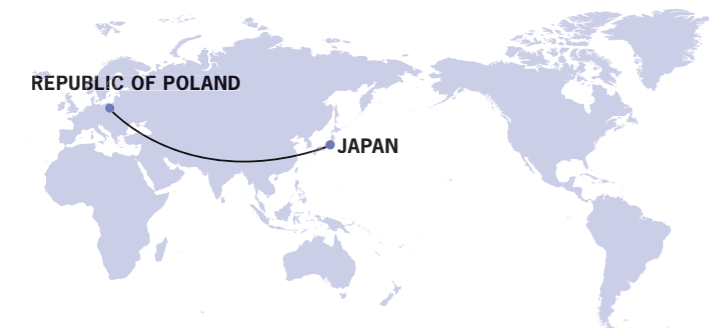


Conveying Local Charm with Warm Hospitality

Uwajima is a stunningly scenic town in Shikoku. Our guide to a revived historic inn is a Pole who loves Japanese culture. Through his eyes, we find new charms in Uwajima.



Despite the heavy rain disaster that occurred in July in western Japan, the tourist facilities such as Kiya Ryokan were unaffected. The inn continues to delight tourists with warm hospitality and its Meiji Period charm.



Bartholomeus Greb

Born in Poland in 1980, Greb was raised in Freiburg, Germany. He first came to Ehime as an exchange student, and later during a working holiday, and since 2012 has been employed as the sales and marketing manager of the historic Kiya Ryokan. He also serves as an advisor on international tourism to Uwajima City.

“Take a look at the ceiling. Clear acrylic panels have been installed, so now you can see from the ground floor all the way up to the arrangement of the roof beams.”

The explanation in fluent Japanese is given by Bartholomeus Greb, a Pole who serves as the sales and marketing manager of the Kiya Ryokan in Uwajima City, Ehime

Prefecture. This *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn), founded in 1911, during the Meiji Period, was loved by literary giants and statesmen early in its history. Although it had closed its doors due to obsolescence, it reopened in 2012 through the concerted efforts of local volunteers and creative experts.

Having moved from Poland to Germany, Greb was raised in Freiburg, and became attracted to Japanese culture at the age of 11. Karate lessons were followed by an increasing fascination with the spiritual culture of Japan, including *bushido* and other arts. Later he had an opportunity to study in Matsuyama, which is a sister city of Freiburg, followed some years later by a working holiday in Japan. Learning swordsmanship, tea ceremony, and other skills, he was increasingly drawn to traditional culture, and felt a sense of loss at the disappearance of well-constructed

old-style Japanese buildings as they were pulled down one after another. About this time, he heard that the Kiya Ryokan was hiring staff and applied without hesitation.

“I knew nothing about the hotel business, but I knew that showing traditional Japanese hospitality is the most important thing, so I just keep giving my best.”

Nowadays hospitality tends to be mixed with services that entail separate charges, but hospitality is really about making a guest feel comfortable, which intrinsically does not relate to a fee schedule, as Greb is keen to point out. Some time ago, an elderly lady in Uwajima had invited him to her home, where the *tokonoma* (alcove) was decorated with flowers from her yard. She served him a home-cooked meal of vegetables grown in her garden, simple but straight from the heart, which impressed Greb as authentic hospitality. “Avoiding

pretentiousness, while treating the things at hand with respect. I want to tell people about the structure of the inn, already a hundred years old, as well as the special places in Uwajima.”

A castle town with a history, blessed with the natural bounty of the sea and the hills, Uwajima is a place where traditional culture, such as the production of *washi* (Japanese paper) and festive banners, is still alive and well. Greb, who also serves as an advisor on international tourism to the city, says that even a slight change in outlook will generate a greater appeal. “For example, even though Uwajima Castle, a symbol of the city, is relatively small, it is a treasure trove of 400 different types of plants.” These kinds of unique facets of local attractions, having impressed Greb, are communicated to the rest of the world on his web magazine, called “Uwajima Deep.”

And indeed, intrigued by what they find on the website, more than a few have come to Uwajima in search of deep experiences.

To help visitors enjoy the charms of Uwajima, fee-based guided experiential tours are being planned. Greb adds, “I think it would be interesting to invite artists from Germany and from my homeland, Poland, to design packaging for Uwajima’s unique products.”

His local friends, who affectionately call him “Baru-kun,” appreciate the

original proposals he generates, saying that “It’s gotten hard to think about Uwajima without Baku-kun.” It is certain that “Baru-kun” will continue to communicate the charms of Uwajima with a heart full of traditional hospitality. “Uwajima suffered damage during the torrential rains of July, but thankfully, the city has recovered,” he says, hastening to add that, “The ryokan is operating with its usual hospitality—and you could be the next visitor!” *



Uwajima Castle, built in 1601, is one of only 12 original castles in Japan.

The Kuroda brothers are the fourth-generation proprietors of the Kuroda Festive Banner Shop, in business since 1907. Discussion becomes lively when Greb, who also serves as an advisor on tourism, suggests, “Let’s hold the Big Fishing Catch Flag Art Exhibition again!”

