

# Karuizawa, Japan: In the Footsteps of John Lennon

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Kyu-Karuizawa Ginza shopping street. Beth Reiber photos.

## John Lennon and Yoko Ono's Go-to Spot in Japan: Karuizawa

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By Beth Reiber

When I mentioned to some long-time expats living in Tokyo for more than 20 years that I was on my way to Karuizawa, I got nothing but guffaws.



Dining hall of the Mampei Hotel in Karuizawa. Beth Reiber photos.

Why on earth would anyone go to what they apparently considered a shopping destination for the wealthy?

“For skiing?” I ventured. After all, Karuizawa is located in Nagano Prefecture, which hosted the 1998 Olympics. My friend who has skied her way around [Japan](#) snorted. “Only if you’re a kid or like bunny slopes.”

Apparently, Karuizawa had been the site only of the curling event, whatever the heck that was.

### **John Lennon and Karuizawa**



Mampey Hotel's bar, where bartender Ozawa-san served John Lennon

I shrugged. I was on assignment.

And though I wasn't thrilled about going to what I thought might be a boring destination, I knew I almost always discovered something intriguing no matter where I went.

In Karuizawa, it turned out to be John Lennon.

[Hokuriku Shinkansen bullet train](#), which is bringing more visitors to the region than ever before, Karuizawa has been a popular summer retreat since the 1880s, when Canadian missionary Alexander Croft Shaw built the region's first summer residence here.



Curling at the Karuizawa Ice Park. It's not clear if John was a fan.

Others looking for an escape from sweltering Tokyo soon followed, lured by Karuizawa's 1,000-foot altitude offering cooler temperatures, scenic mountain views, wooded areas of birch and larch and hot springs bathing.

### **Village Filled with Politicians**

Only the moneyed could afford second homes here, so it became a village filled with Japanese politicians, the imperial family, and wealthy expats and Japanese, a Japanese version of the Hamptons or Palm Springs.

In any case, that's how Lennon ended up here. Yoko's parents were wealthy, upper class Japanese who maintained a summer home in Karuizawa.

John and Yoko enjoyed the town's quaint ambiance so much, they came for what turned

out to be the last four summer's of John's life before he was murdered in 1980.



Room 128 at Mampei Hotel, where John Lennon and Yoko Ono always stayed

## Room 128

Together with their son Sean, John and Yoko always stayed in the historic Mampei Hotel, in room 128.

Originally serving as a traditional Japanese inn for travelers on the Nakasendo that stretched between Tokyo and Kyoto, it was transformed into a hotel in 1894 to welcome international visitors from around the world.

In 1936 it was remodeled into a half-timbered mountain lodge (annexes were added later). With its rustic charm, wood-paneled dining hall and old-fashioned rooms, it's easy to see

why Lennon enjoyed staying here.

I had the opportunity to see the room where he stayed with his family. It's modest, with a claw-foot tub and glass shoji panels dividing the room into separate sleeping and sitting areas. The room's modesty tells me much about this famous man.

## Kyu-Karuizawa Ginza

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Not far from the hotel is the town's main shopping street, a pedestrian lane known as Kyu-Karuizawa Ginza in reference to its many shops that are branches of famous stores in Tokyo's Ginza district.



John Lennon's favorite bakery in Karuizawa.

It has the usual clothing, gifts and other novelty items you'd expect from a tourist town, as

well as several famous cafes.



Karuizawa Prince ski resort is considered a beginner's slope. SnowJapan photo.

One is infamous for having refused to serve John (it's said they turned him away because he looked like a hippie), while the French Bakery was John's favorite hangout, with a photo of the musician hanging proudly inside.

### **Other Draws Too**

Of course, there are other draws in this town of about 20,000 residents, too, including vintage summer homes in various architectural styles and other historic buildings, such as the century-old post office that has been repurposed as the local tourist office.

You can try your hand at curling at the Karuizawa Ice Park, which I decided after watching people play looks like shuffleboard on ice.

There are more than a handful of museums, including the Sezon Museum of Modern Art museums and the Karuizawa Museum of History and Culture where you can learn all about the town's past.

For nature lovers, there are parks, hiking trails and the Wild Bird Forest, where up to 130



different types of birds have been spotted.



Gallery on Kyu-Karuizawa Ginza shopping street

## **Karuizawa Prince Hotel Ski Resort**

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Skiing takes place at the Karuizawa Prince Hotel Ski Resort, which offers various runs suitable for children and families and because of artificial snow is open from November to March.

In fact, the Karuizawa Prince Hotel is the biggest player in town, with grounds larger than Tokyo Disneyland and offering a shopping plaza with more than 200 stores, four golf courses, and three separate hotels as well as about 300 free-standing cottages.

## **30 Year Memory**

In fact, after seeing the Prince Hotel's massive grounds, I realized that I'd stayed in one of its cottages more than 30 years ago.

I was on a ski trip with several Japanese friends who had taken care of all the arrangements and driving.



The new Hokuriku Shinkansen high-speed train arcs north up into the Japanese Alps, including to Karuizawa, where John and Yoko used to visit.

I guess that makes me a bunny. With a bad memory.

Even so, during what turned out to be my second trip I found Karuizawa to be much more laid back and less ostentatious than I'd imagined, the kind of place where John and Yoko might have been able to relax, be themselves and be left alone.

Maybe that's why famous people still choose to stay here.

A woman from the Karuizawa Tourist Association told me that none other than Bill Gates has a summer retreat here. Maybe he, too, is a John Lennon fan.

*Beth Reiber's career as a full-time freelance travel writer has spanned more than three decades and taken her to about 45 countries, including years living in Germany and Japan.*

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