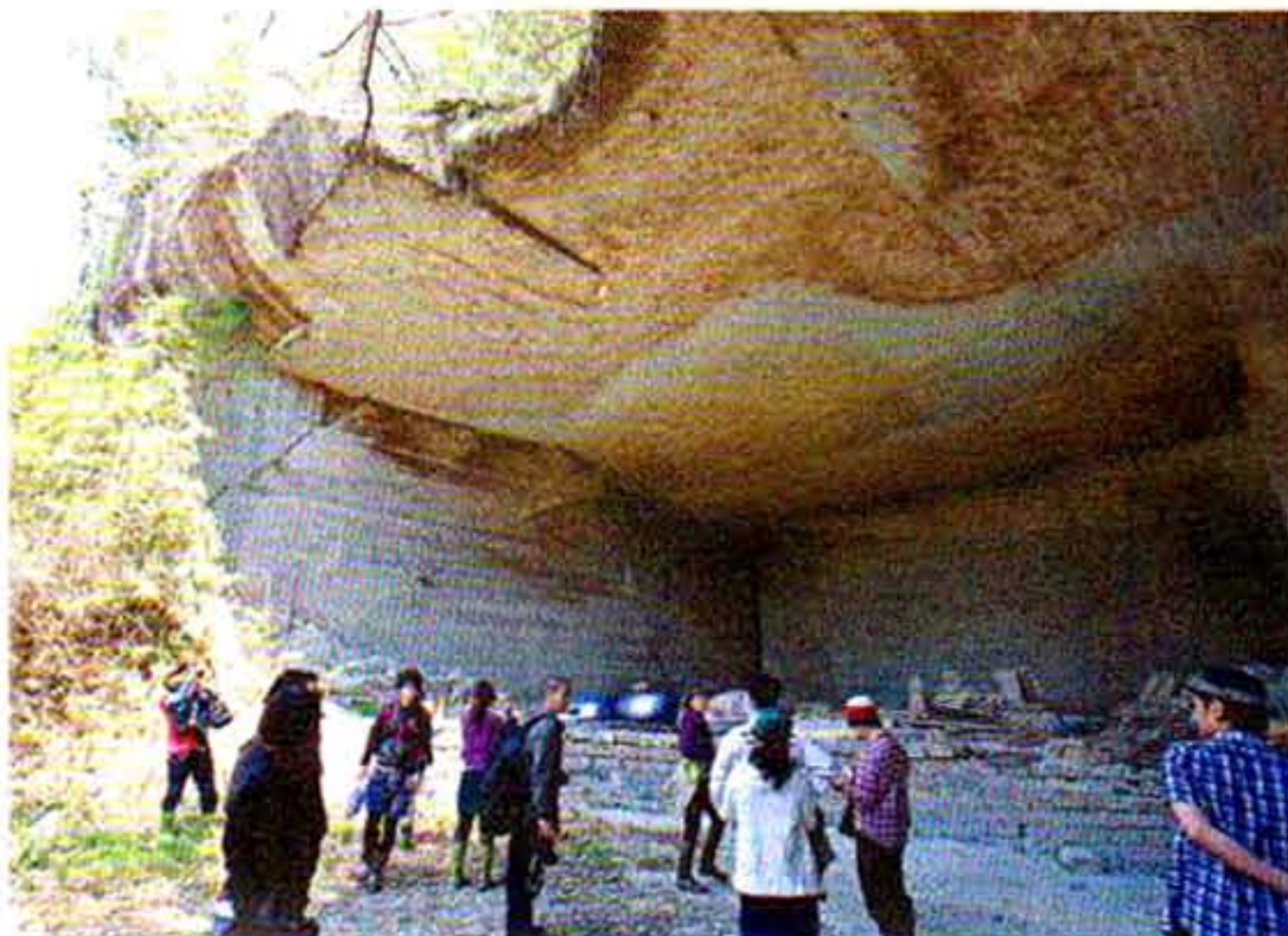


Tour participants paddle a raft on a dark underground lake at a former Oya stone quarry. The lake is up to 15 meters deep and feels like part of an underground shrine, surrounded by porous stone walls. It is chilly inside, with the temperature around 5 C on April 27.



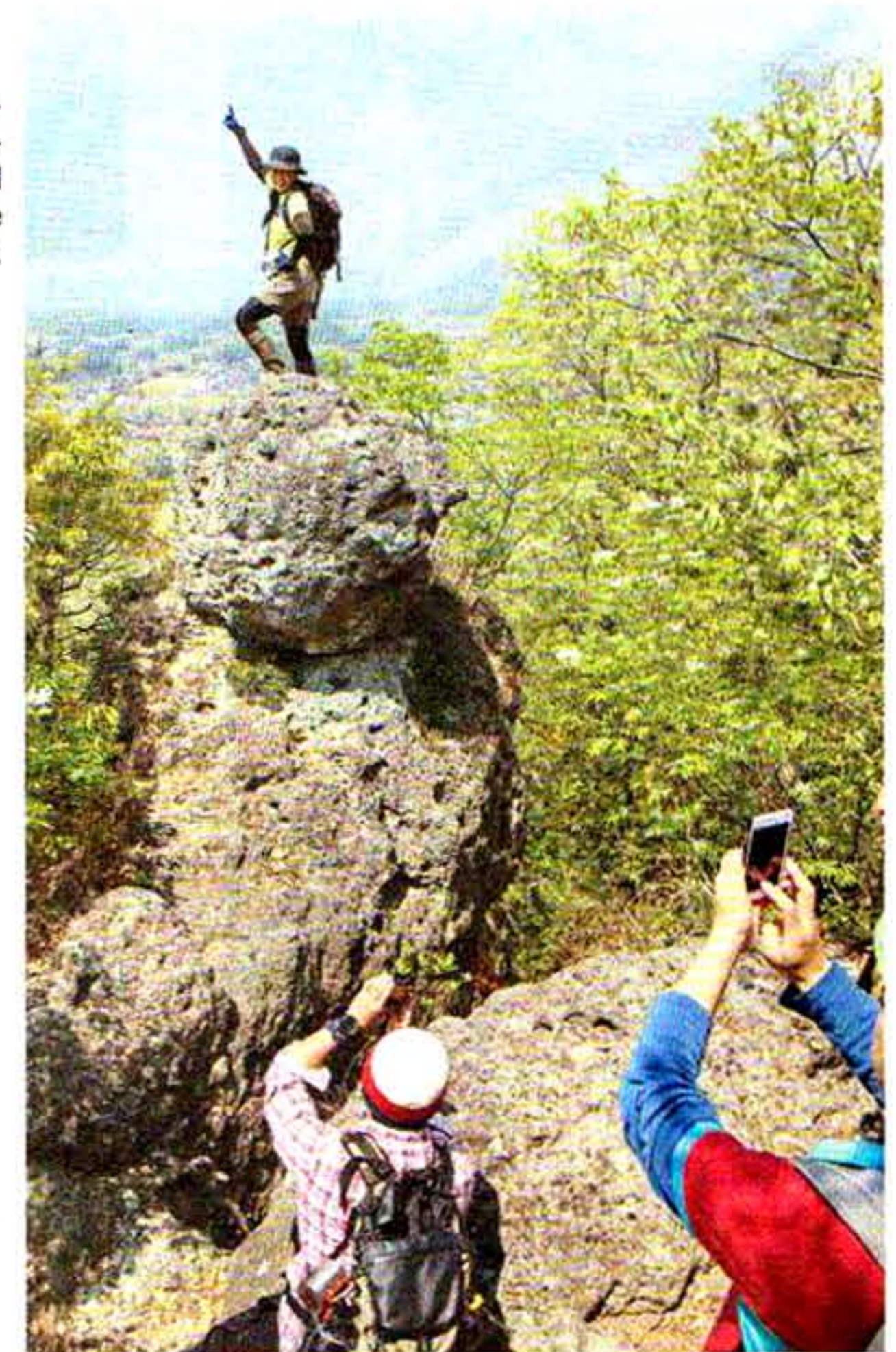
On the hiking trail, a participant explores a gap in an Oya stone formation.



Participants view a former quarry.



Participants enjoy lunch made with local ingredients in a space hewn from an Oya stone formation. It is part of one of the many former quarries in the Oya district in Utsunomiya.



Participants hike the 228-meter-high Mt. Tomuro, a mountain composed of Oya stone, and take a photo atop an Oya stone outcropping near the peak.

## See Oya stones like never before

By Ryuzo Suzuki  
Yomiuri Shimbun Photographer

**U**TSUNOMIYA—Four Tochigi Prefecture-based companies have joined forces to launch tours in and around a defunct stone quarry in the city's Oya district. The excursions provide participants with opportunities to gain firsthand experience in the Oya stone production area.

Visits to the quarry, usually a restricted zone, have been planned with the intention of explaining the attractiveness of the Oya area to tourists while also trying to revitalize the economy of the Oya stone production area.

The tour starts with a hike on a mountain composed of Oya stone and then rafting on an underground "lake" formed by the accumulation of rainwater in a subterranean former quarry.

Tour participants board eight-seat rafts and paddle across the surface of the about 2,000-square-meter lake. At a quarry site above ground, they can have lunch made with local ingredients while taking in the scenery.

Since long ago, Oya stone was used as material for exteriors and storehouses as the porous stones are easy to process. The stones came to nationwide attention around 1923 after American architect Frank Lloyd Wright used the stones for his Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.

In recent years, however, the stone output decreased to around one-fiftieth of its peak as the stone has been deprived of its market due to concrete and inexpensive imported stone. It is believed that there may be abandoned quarries and mines at more than 200 locations in the district.

To make use of the peculiar qualities of the district, four local cross-industrial companies—in fields such as

spatial design, outdoor sports and travel—established Chiikikachi Keikaku LLP to organize the tours. According to the organizer, the company started hosting the tour after conducting safety checks such as investigating the danger of rocks collapsing.

The first tour was held April 27 with the participation of 14 people aged 25 through 48. The tour office was flooded with reservation requests as soon as reservations began to be accepted by the end of March. All of the April 27 participants had made reservations by the end of March, according to the organizer.

The organizer expects to hold tours three or four times each month.

Norio Ojima, 34, came from Yokohama to participate in the tour with his wife and another couple.

"I came across the tour while I was looking on the Internet for tours to rarely visited regions," he said. "It was really mysterious to sail by boat on dark



Participants receive paddling instructions before taking a rafting cruise on an underground lake.

water in dead silence. I had the sensation of floating and felt as if I were soaking up history directly."

Ojima said he and his companions were fully satisfied with the tour.

"Storehouses made of Oya stone that have remained in the district and the lifestyle of the local people are also appealing," Ojima said. "We'd like to visit again in a different season."