
JAPAN'S MOST UNFORGETTABLE SHRINES

Relaxing is one thing, but to feel at peace, you need to step away from the neon signs and busy streets and explore the spiritual side of Japan. Shrines are an integral part of Japanese cultural tapestry. You will find these places of worship hidden in forest sandwiched between office towers on busy streets or clinging into mountain tops visiting them can be a spiritual experience, a chance to gain insights into Japanese tradition and history, or simply enjoy serene escape from the busy city life.

Shrines are considered to be the residences of Kami (Shinto gods) and are used as places of worship. The names of Shinto shrines in Japan can end in –jinja, jingu (for Imperial shrines), or taisha. Shrines are built to serve the Shinto religious tradition and are characterized by a Torii gate at the entrance decorated with vermilion, and are guarded by fox, dog, or other animal statues. The architecture of a shrine typically includes a main sanctuary (honden), where the shrine's sacred object is kept, and a worship hall (haiden), where people make prayers and offerings. Some shrines may have treasury buildings and stages for dance or theatre performances. There are close to 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan and are of several different categories like:

- Sengen shrines- dedicated to the Shinto deity of Mt. Fuji
- Hachiman shrines- dedicated to the Kami of war
- Inari shrines- dedicated to the Kami of huge harvest of grains
- Kumano shrines - dedicated to the twelve Kami, three Grand Shrines in the three Kumano mountains
- Tenjin shrines- dedicated to the Kami of Sugawara No Michizane, a politician and scholar

FUSHIMI INARI SHRINE

Fushimi Inari Shrine (伏見稲荷大社, Fushimi Inari Taisha) is an important Shinto shrine in southern Kyoto. It is famous for its thousands of vermilion Torii gates, which straddle a network of trails behind its main buildings. The trails lead into the wooded forest of the sacred Mount Inari, which stands at 233 meters and belongs to the shrine grounds. Fushimi Inari is the most important of several thousands of shrines dedicated to Inari, the Shinto god of huge harvest of grains. Foxes are thought to be Inari's messengers, resulting in many fox statues across the shrine grounds. Fushimi Inari Shrine has ancient origins, predating the capital's move to Kyoto in 794.

ITSUKUSHIMA SHRINE

The centuries-old Itsukushima Shrine (厳島神社, Itsukushima Jinja) on Miyajima is the source of both the island's fame and its name. Formally named Itsukushima, the island is more popularly known as "Miyajima", literally "shrine island" in Japanese, thanks to its star attraction. It is in the city of Hatsukaichi in Hiroshima Prefecture in Japan. The shrine is known worldwide for its iconic "floating" Torii gate. The shrine and its Torii gate are unique for being built over water, seemingly floating in the sea during high tide. The shrine complex consists of multiple buildings, including a prayer hall, a main hall and a noh (a well-respected Japanese form of art and entertainment) theater stage, which are connected by boardwalks and supported by pillars above the sea.

NIKKO TOSHOGU SHRINE

Nikko Toshogu Shrine (日光東照宮, NikkōTōshōgū) located in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan is the final resting place of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate that ruled Japan for over 250 years until 1868. Ieyasu is enshrined at Toshogu as the deity Tosho Daigongen, "Great Deity of the East Shining Light". Initially a relatively simple mausoleum, Toshogu was enlarged into the spectacular complex seen today by Ieyasu grandson Iemitsu during the first half of the 1600s.

The lavishly decorated shrine complex consists of more than a dozen buildings set in a beautiful forest. Countless wood carvings and large amounts of gold leaf were used to decorate the buildings in a way not seen elsewhere in Japan, where simplicity has been traditionally stressed in shrine architecture.

YUDONO-SAN SHRINE

Yudono-san (湯殿山) is one of the three mountains of Dewa Sanzan, and its shrine is considered to be a kind of inner sanctum. It is located to the north west of Gassan in the eastern area of Tsuruoka city in the north-western region of Yamagata Prefecture. In fact, Yudono-san is so sacred that one is neither to talk nor hear of what happens inside the shrine. Despite its secrecy and mystery, Yudono-san is relatively easily accessible via a toll road. Located in a valley below the summit, the shrine is only 200 meters from the parking lot. The traditional approach, however, is more challenging, consisting of a descent via a steep hiking trail from the summit of Gas-san visitors may note that Dewa Sanzan contains both Shinto and Buddhist elements.

IZUMO OYASHIRO

Izumo Ooyashiro (出雲大社) is located in the city of Izumo in Shimane Prefecture, a one-hour train ride west of Matsue. It is one of Japan's most important shrines. There are no records of exactly when Izumo Taisha was built, but it is often considered the oldest shrine in Japan, being already in existence in the early 700s as revealed by the nation's oldest chronicles. The main approach to the shrine starts at a giant Torii gate and a shopping street lined by stores and restaurants. At the end of the street stands a large wooden Torii gate, which marks the entrance to the actual shrine grounds. Continuing north, the approach uniquely leads downhill for a few dozen meters, leading to the Matsu no Sando where the trail is divided into three lanes by two rows of pine trees. Visitors are to refrain from taking the centre lane, as it is said to be the path reserved for the deities.

KUMANO NACHI TAISHA GRAND SHRINE, NACHISAN

Kumano sanzan located in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan is the head shrine of about 4,000 Kumano shrines in Japan. It's part of a historic area of worship on NACHISAN, a scenic mountain on the Kii Peninsula. Whether it's a stunning location, outstanding architecture, historic significance, or cultural contribution, each of these shrines in Japan is worth visiting.

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