

## WORLD HERITAGE LIST

World recognition for Japan's cultural and natural heritage



### **Shirakami-Sanchi**

Japan's last remaining virgin forests of Siebold's beech trees are found in the Shirakami Mountains. This grove is in Akita Prefecture.  
© Akita Pref.

With a diverse natural beauty and a long, distinctive cultural history that produced a rich variety of buildings and other cultural properties which still exist today, Japan has had 14 sites placed on the World Heritage List as of 2007.

### **The World Heritage Convention**

Officially called the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the World Heritage Convention was adopted on 16 November 1972 by the 17th General Conference of UNESCO. Taking the important step of linking together the concepts of nature conservation and preservation of cultural properties,

the convention's purpose is to protect and preserve places and properties that are an irreplaceable part of the cultural heritage of all humanity. This includes notable historical and archeological sites, monuments, and groups of buildings as well as natural features, natural sites, and geographical and physiographical formations. The convention also defines the duties of its signatory countries, and it specifies how the World Heritage Fund is to be used to support tasks such as training assistance, technical cooperation, and emergency assistance.

Japan ratified the convention on 30 June 1992 and was the 126th nation to do so. As of July 2007, 184 countries had ratified the convention, and a total of 851 properties had been inscribed on the World Heritage

List. The 22nd session of the World Heritage Committee was held in Kyoto in 1998.

## Cultural sites

### Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area (year of designation: 1993)

Located in Nara Prefecture, the Horyu-ji temple was founded in the early 7th century by order of Prince Shotoku (574-622), who played a key role in the introduction of Buddhism into Japan. Although the temple compound was destroyed by fire in 670, it was soon rebuilt on a larger scale within the compound later designated as the Western Precinct. The extant pagoda, main hall (*kondo*), inner gate (*chumon*), and part of the surrounding corridors are the oldest wooden buildings in the world, dating from the late 7th to early 8th centuries. The Eastern Precinct was added in the 8th century. The World Heritage designation covers 48 buildings.

### Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu (2000)

The Kingdom of Ryukyu ruled the Ryukyu archipelago, including Okinawa and many other islands, for 400 years beginning in the 15th century. The word *gusuku* means "castle" or "high place with an enclosure" in the Ryukyu dialect. The nine properties include castle ruins and sacred sites that are important artifacts of the distinctive culture that developed in these islands. Shuri Castle, located in the city of Naha, served as the main castle of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

### Himeji-jo (1993)

Located in the city of Himeji, Hyogo Prefecture, Himeji-jo is also known as Shirasagi (White Egret) Castle because of its tall, white elegance. Although the castle was first constructed during the mid-14th century, most of the 83 existing structures were built between 1601 and 1609. The finest surviving example of Japanese castle architecture, Himeji-jo was both a beautiful and formidable military stronghold. Once past the outer walls, attackers would still



### Great Buddha of Nara

This 15-meter bronze statue of the Buddha Birushana has been severely damaged and restored several times since its creation in 752.  
© Todaiji

have had to contend with a labyrinth of easily defended passageways before they could even approach the four linked donjons. The main compound is located on a hill 45 meters (148 ft) high, and, along with the adjoining west compound, it is surrounded by three rings of outer compounds. The main donjon appears five stories high on the outside but is actually seven stories on the inside.

### Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome)(1996)

Also known as the Genbaku Dome and the Atomic Bomb Dome, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial has been preserved in the same condition it was in following detonation of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. The building was originally built in 1915 as the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall. According to the

### Hiroshima Peace Memorial

Ground zero of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 was 160 meters southeast of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, the building now known as the Genbaku Dome or Atomic Bomb Dome.  
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World Heritage advisory body evaluation, it “is a stark and powerful symbol of the achievement of world peace for more than half a century following the unleashing of the most destructive force ever created by humankind.”

## Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto (Kyoto, Uji, and Otsu Cities)(1994)

The ancient capital of Japan, Kyoto was home to the imperial court from 794 to 1868. As the center of Japanese culture for more than 1,000 years, Kyoto is home to an incredible wealth of traditional architecture, including Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and imperial villas. Although a great many others could have been added, the World Heritage site designation specifically mentions 17 properties, including the following. The temple Kiyomizudera is famous for its wide veranda, which overlooks the city from the east. The temples Kinkakuji (Temple of the Golden Pavilion) and Ginkakuji (Temple of the Silver Pavilion) served as villas for Ashikaga shoguns in the 15th century. The Zen temple Ryoanji is home of Japan’s most famous Zen-style rock garden. Elegant Nijo Castle served as the residence for the Tokugawa shoguns during their visits to Kyoto. Located south of Kyoto in the city of Uji, the temple Byodoin is home to one of the finest examples of Heian-period (794-1185) architecture, the Hoodo (Phoenix Hall).

## Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara (1998)

From 710 to 784, Nara served as the capital of Japan. Absorbing cultural (literature, art, architecture, etc.) and religious influences from Tang China, the city became a prosperous center of Japanese culture. Nara was long the most important center of Buddhism in Japan and this legacy is well represented in the World Heritage properties. Most striking is the Great Buddha Hall of the temple Todaiji. One of the largest wooden structures in the world, it houses the 15-meter bronze statue known as the Great Buddha of Nara. Important examples of Buddhist architecture can also be found at the temples Kofukuji, Yakushiji, and Toshodaiji. The Kasuga Shrine is noted for its unique style of



Shinto shrine architecture (*kasuga-zukuri*).

## Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama (1995)

The three mountain villages of Ogimachi, Ainokura, and Suganuma in the Shirakawa-go/Gokayama area contain many farm houses built in the *gassho-zukuri* style. The steep thatched roofs of these houses had to stand up to the heavy snowfalls that isolated the remote villages in winter. The homes were designed so that the upper floors could be used for raising silkworms.

## Itsukushima Shinto Shrine (1996)

According to tradition, Itsukushima Shrine was established in 593. It is located on a Hiroshima Bay island that has been considered sacred since ancient times. The shrine is famous for its large *torii* gate, which stands 160 meters out into the bay, and for its beautiful vermilion shrine buildings which seem to float above the water at high tide.

### Shirakawa-go

Many thatch-roofed *gasho-zukuri* farm houses can be seen in this view of Ogimachi in the Shirakawa-go area.

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### Itsukushima Shrine

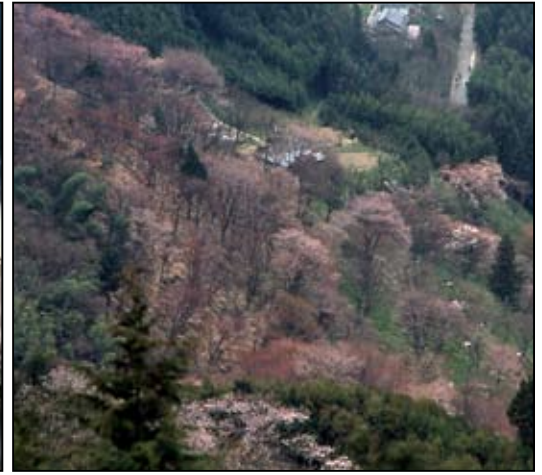
Dedicated to three tutelary deities of fishing and built mostly over the water of Hiroshima Bay, this shrine, along with its island setting, is considered one of the three most beautiful scenic sights in Japan.

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**Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape (2007)**

Located in the city of Oda in Shimane Prefecture, the Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine was worked for approximately 400 years, from the early 16th to 20th centuries. Following the introduction of advanced mining techniques, in the 16th and 17th centuries the mine produced huge quantities of silver, contributing to the economic development of both Japan and Asia, where the silver was used in international trade.



**Koyasan**  
The roof of the Great Central Pagoda floats on the morning mist of Koyasan in the Kii Mountains. This Buddhist monastic complex contains about 120 temple buildings.  
© Kodansha

**Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range (2004)**

The sacred sites of Yoshino and Omine, Kumano Sanzan, and Koyasan are located in the Kii Mountains, a densely forested region south of the ancient capital cities of Nara and Kyoto. Yoshino and Omine contain many mountain temples of Shugendō, a Buddhist mountain ascetic sect that incorporates elements of Shinto. Kumano Sanzan is the collective name for three Shinto shrines located in the Kumano district. Koyasan is a Buddhist monastic complex located on a mountain of the same name.

**Shrines and Temples of Nikko (1999)**

Nikko is most famous as the site of Toshogu, the Shinto shrine established in the 17th century to house the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate. Shrine buildings, such as the main gate known as the Yomeimon, are lavishly decorated with beautifully carved and



brightly painted figures. Also at Nikko are the Futarasan Shrine, the Buddhist temple Rinnoji, and a forest of huge cryptomeria trees planted around the time Toshogu was built.

**Natural sites**

**Shirakami-Sanchi (1993)**

Located in the northern part of Japan's main island of Honshu, the Shirakami Mountains are covered with the last remaining virgin forests of Siebold's beech trees (see photo on page 1). Japanese black bears and Japanese serow live in the forests along with many bird species.

**Shiretoko (2005)**

The Shiretoko Peninsula is located in the northeast corner of Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido. Covered by dense coniferous forest and a massive volcanic range, it is one of the wildest and most remote regions in Japan. An excellent example of the interaction of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, Shiretoko is an important habitat for a number of endangered plant and animal species.

**Yoshinoyama**  
The Yoshinoyama hills in the Kii Mountains are famous for their cherry blossoms and historical sites.  
© Kodansha



**Shiretoko**  
These brown bears are fishing in a river in Shiretoko Peninsula, a virgin mountain region consisting of forests, caldera lakes, and volcanoes.  
© Yomiuri Shimbun

**Yakushima (1993)**

The World Heritage site designation covers over one-fifth of the island of Yakushima. Receiving the heaviest rainfall in Japan, the island has subtropical coastal areas as well as the tallest mountain in the Kyushu region. The forests contain many Japanese cryptomeria trees which are thousands of years old. One of those trees, known as the Jomon Sugi, is estimated to be more than 7,000 years old.

**Yomeimon**  
The main gate of Toshogu Shrine, the Yomeimon is the most famous example of the ornate architectural style found at Nikko. Constructed in 1636, it contains many brightly colored carvings of plants, birds, animals, and mythical beasts.  
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