

# 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.



Japan possesses a diverse natural beauty and a long history of distinctive cultural achievements. Together, these have produced a variety of buildings and natural sites that continue to enrich our world today. As of 2019, Japan has 23 sites which have been recognized by the World Heritage List.

### 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. By linking together the concepts of nature conservation and preservation of cultural properties, the purpose of the convention is to protect irreplaceable parts of humanity's cultural heritage. This includes notable historical and archaeological sites, monuments, groups of buildings and other man-made locations, as well as natural sites including important ecological sanctuaries and unique geological features. The convention also defines the duties of its signatory countries, and it specifies how

### 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. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)



the World Heritage Fund is to be used to support tasks such as training assistance, technical cooperation, and emergency assistance.

As of 2019, 193 countries had ratified the convention, and a total of 1,121 properties had been inscribed on the World Heritage List. The Closing Event of the 40th Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention was held in Kyoto in November 2012.

## 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.

### Fujisan, sacred place and source of artistic inspiration (2013)

At 3,776 meters, Mount Fuji, or Fujisan, is Japan's highest mountain, straddling the border between Shizuoka and Yamanashi Prefectures. The snow-capped peak of Fujisan is an iconic symbol of Japan that is recognized throughout the world. It is an active volcano, although it has not erupted since 1708, during the Edo era. The World Heritage designation consists of 25 sites reflecting the essence of Fujisan's sacred and artistic landscape. Fujisan has long been the object of pilgrimages, providing inspiration to

artists and poets. In the 12th century, Fujisan became the center of training for Shugendo, an ascetic religion including elements of Buddhism and Shinto. It has been depicted in art since the 11th century, but its most widely recognized depictions are in the 19th century woodblock prints of Hokusai and other artists, in which it appears against crashing waves, pine groves, and surrounding lakes. Its symmetrical form and unique outline continue to inspire artists around the world to this day.



**Mount Fuji** snow-covered tip stands out against the springtime green

### 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. Sadly, four of the buildings of Shuri Castle, including the main Seiden hall, were destroyed by a fire in October 2019. Reconstruction work is being planned with support from UNESCO.

### Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region (2018)

As a result of its frequent interaction with European traders, the port of Nagasaki



became the center of a growing Japanese Christian community. The Tokugawa Shogunate, however, adopted a policy of national seclusion and outlawed the new religion. Despite the threat of harsh punishments if caught, many Japanese Christians continued to practice their faith in secret, maintaining hidden places of worship for over 200 years. These communities of 'Hidden Christians' went undetected until Japan re-opened to the world in the 19th century. The World Heritage designation applies to twelve locations in Nagasaki and Kumamoto Prefectures. These include churches built during the 19th and 20th centuries on the former sites of secret places of worship, and those which honor the history of the Hidden Christians. It also includes the ruins of Hara and Hinoe Castles, which were destroyed as a result of the 1637-8 Shimabara Rebellion of Christian resistance, and many sites on Hirado Island and in Sakitsu Village.



#### **Himeji-jō (1993)**

Located in the city of Himeji, Hyogo Prefecture, Himeji-jō 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-jō was both a beautiful and formidable military stronghold. Once past the outer walls, attackers would still 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.

#### **Hiraizumi (2011)**

Located in the center of the Tohoku region, Hiraizumi is home to temples, gardens, and other historical remains of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, which governed the Tohoku region for over 100 years beginning in the late 11th century. The designated site also includes a sacred mountain. Built with uniquely Japanese building construction and horticultural techniques, these temples and gardens represent the ideals of Pure Land Buddhism, a Buddhist school of thought which flourished in Japan during that era, expressing a peaceful world with no conflict. Especially well-known are Chuson-ji Temple, which houses golden Buddha statues, and Motsu-ji Temple, which has a pond that represents the Pure Land. Together they serve as a reminder of the glory of by-gone days.

#### **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 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

### Shirakawa-go

Many thatched gassho-zukuri farmhouses can be seen in the Shirakawa-go area.  
(Photo courtesy of Getty Images)

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 and religious influences, including literature, art and architecture, 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 Great Buddha of Nara, a bronze statue 15-meters tall (excluding its pedestal). Important examples of Buddhist architecture can also be found at the temples Kofukuji, Yakushiji, and Toshodaiji. The Kasuga-Taisha 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 farmhouses 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.



### Itsukushima Shrine

Dedicated to three tutelary deities of maritime transportation and built mostly over the water of Hiroshima Bay, this shrine and its island setting are considered one of the three most beautiful scenic sights in Japan.  
(Photo courtesy of Getty Images)

### 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.

### Moze-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan (2019)

Located on a plateau above the Osaka Plain, this World Heritage designation includes 49 kofun burial mounds dating from between the 3rd and 6th centuries CE. The mounds were



### Great Buddha of Nara

This 15-meter (excluding its pedestal) bronze statue of the Buddha Birushana has been severely damaged and restored several times since its creation in AD 752.



### Yoshinoyama

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



built in circular, square, keyhole and other shapes, and many of the larger ones are surrounded by moats. Throughout Japan, over 160,000 burial mounds like these have been discovered, but these 49 are considered to be the most culturally significant, housing the tombs of ancient emperors and other elite members of society, and containing a wide range of funerary artifacts.



with the Munakata Grand Shrine in Kyushu, which houses many historic relics, including several National Treasures of Japan.

### 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 Shugendo, 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.

### Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region (2017)

Located 60km off the northwest coast of Kyushu, Okinoshima is an exceptional example of the tradition of worshipping a sacred island. The island contains a number of archaeologically significant sites which are still intact, providing a clear chronological record of how the rituals practiced there have evolved since the 4th century A.D.. The rituals performed at Okinoshima involved the depositing of votive objects at different sites on the island, and these objects, many of which were made by master craftsmen from overseas, provide us today with evidence of the trade that occurred between Japan, Korea and the rest of Asia. Okinoshima is connected

### Shrines and Temples of Nikko (1999)

Nikko is most famous as the site of Toshogu, the Shinto shrine established in the 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites (2014)

Tomioka Silk Mill was Japan's first mechanized silk-reeling factory, established in the southwestern part of Gunma Prefecture. Using Western technology, this government-run factory featured silk reeling machines with 300 basins in a mill that was 140 meters long, making it one of the world's largest silk mills at that time. This innovation allowed the mass production of raw silk, such that silk could be



### Hetsu-miya, Munakata Taisha

Hetsu-miya is one of the three shrines that comprise Munakata Taisha. The Main Hall and Worship Hall have been designated as Important Cultural Properties by the Japanese government.

(Photo courtesy of Kyodo News)

**Tomioka Silk Mill East Cocoon Warehouse**

The main buildings of Tomioka Silk Mill have remained almost unchanged since they were built about 150 years ago.  
(Photo courtesy of Tomioka City)



afforded by people all over the world, changing their lives and cultures for the better.

**Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding, and Coal Mining (2015)**

Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the foundations of the iron and steel, shipbuilding, and coal mining industries were established, which later became key industries in Japan. Starting by observing the techniques of Western industry and introducing technology from overseas, Japan's industrialization was achieved in a mere 50 years as a result of the efforts of people nationwide. There are 23 sites marking Japan's Meiji industrial revolution, where industrialization from the West to a non-Western nation was successfully transferred. These can be found in Kyushu and also in the Tohoku and Kanto areas.


**Nirayama Reverberatory Furnace**

Reverberatory furnaces were used to melt and refine metals. The Nirayama Reverberatory Furnace is one of three remaining reverberatory furnaces built at the end of the Edo period.  
(Photo courtesy of "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" World Heritage Council)

**The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement (2016)**

Architect Le Corbusier, who was born in Switzerland and who became successful in France, was a major architectural influence after the beginning of the 20th century. The National Museum of Western Art in Ueno, Tokyo is the only building in Japan that he designed. Completed in 1959, this architectural work expresses his styles well, including pilotis, slopes, and illumination planning using natural light.


**The National Museum of Western Art**

The National Museum of Western Art, completed in March 1959, is the only building in Japan to have been designed by Le Corbusier.  
(Photo courtesy of The National Museum of Western Art)

## Natural Sites

**Ogasawara Islands (2011)**

This group of over 30 islands is located in the Pacific Ocean approximately 1,000km south-southeast of Tokyo. These islands are uninhabited apart from Chichijima and Hahajima, and they host a rich variety of flora and fauna, as well as beautiful scenery. As the ecosystem has never been part of a larger landmass, there are many life forms which have evolved in diverse ways and are unique to these islands; there are over 600 endemic species of animal and plant life, such as the Bonin Flying Fox (*Pteropus pselaphon*). There are 57 species of endangered plant and animal species for which these islands form an invaluable ecosystem.

### **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 page1). Japanese black bears and Japanese serow live in the forests along with many bird species.

### **Shiretoko (2005)**

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.



#### **Shiretoko**

Many wild animals live in the unspoiled natural environment of the Shiretoko Peninsula in Hokkaido. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

### **Yakushima (1993)**

This 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.