

New World Heritage Sites in Japan

In June 2011, UNESCO designated two new World Heritage Sites in Japan—**Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture and the Ogasawara Islands of Tokyo**

Japan is now home to 16 UNESCO designated World Heritage sites after two new Japanese sites were inscribed by the World Heritage Committee on 29 June 2011. Of the total 16 sites in Japan, twelve are cultural properties and four natural properties. All are considered to be of outstanding universal value in terms of cultural or natural heritage.

Hiraizumi, Iwate Prefecture

The ancient Buddhist temples and landscape of Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture are Japan's latest World Heritage cultural property.

The new World Heritage site includes temples, gardens and archaeological sites representing the Buddhist Pure Land. Among the temples is Chusonji which is famous in Japan for its Golden Hall. Motsuji Temple is also part of the designated site; each year the ritual *Ennen-no-Mai* is performed here. Combining drama, dance and song, these performances are considered the antecedent of Noh theatre.

Other archaeological sites in the town include the ruins of government offices from a time when Hiraizumi, now a town of approximately 8,300 inhabitants, rivalled Kyoto. In the 11th and 12th centuries Hiraizumi was an important centre of power in Japan. It was from here that the Oshu Fujiwara family ruled all of the northern part of Japan's main island. The family and the city prospered, in part thanks to the gold reserves first found in Hiraizumi in the 8th century.

Iwate is one of the prefectures whose coast was devastated

by the 11 March tsunami. The governor of Iwate prefecture stated that it had long been a dream to have Hiraizumi designated as a World Heritage site and its inscription would give great encouragement to those who are currently facing the overwhelming task of recovery.

Ogasawara Islands

This may come as a surprise to many but Japan's fourth World Heritage designated natural property is part of Tokyo. Known more for its archetypal city skyline such as this issue's banner image on page 1, Tokyo Prefecture actually includes mountains to the north of the city and several islands to its south.

The main island and access point of the Ogasawara Islands is Chichijima, but reaching it from central Tokyo 1,000km away takes more than a day as the island is only serviced by a ferry. The very isolation of this group of islands has led to unique species of plants and animals developing.

The importance of the Ogasawara Islands to world heritage is reflected by the fact that they are sometimes referred to as the Galapagos of the East. The islands are home to 195 endangered bird species and a critically endangered bat. There is abundant native plant life (441 native plant taxa) and the islands' marine life is rich. The islands' ecosystems reflect a range of evolutionary processes and this can be seen in both the indigenous species as well as the evolution of species from southeast and north-west Asia.



Ennen-no-Mai (Longevity Dance)



Ogasawara

FURTHER INFORMATION

Hiraizumi You can find details of the sites and how to get to Hiraizumi at <http://hiraizumi.or.jp/en/index.html>. See also Japan National Tourist Organisation's (JNTO) profile of Hiraizumi at www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/JapanesQue/1107/hiraizumi.html.

Ogasawara The Ogasawara Village Tourism Bureau website www.visitogawara.com has more photos of the islands' attractions. See also JNTO's profile of Ogasawara at www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/JapanesQue/1106/ogawara.html.

Japan's World Heritage Sites JNTO has a full listing of Japan's World Heritage sites at www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/scenic/worldheritage/.