

Shimane

There's no doubt that the classic Tokyo-Kyoto-Nara tourist route

offers tourists much to see and do. But off the beaten track, there are many undiscovered charms, both cultural and natural.

Shimane lies in the shadow of Chugoku mountains on the coast of the beautiful Sea of Japan. The mountain range made the area difficult to reach over the centuries, but the modern traveller faces no such problems.

In fact, relative isolation didn't deter one of the early discoverers of Shimane's charms. Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) was one of the first writers to introduce Japan and its culture to foreign readers in English. After arriving in Tokyo in 1890, he worked both at a government college and at an English newspaper before taking up a post to teach English literature at Tokyo University. His writings such as *A Glimpse of Unfamiliar Japan* and *Japan: An attempt at an interpretation* were influential in shaping the image of Japan abroad.

In Japan, he is known as Koizumi Yakumo, the name he adopted when he became a Japanese citizen. He lived in Matsue, the capital of Shimane, for over a year and here he married Koizumi Setsu, the daughter of a local samurai. His former residence is part of the samurai district that remains to the north of Matsue Castle (c), one of Japan's twelve remaining original castles. His residence (b) is open to visitors and there is a museum dedicated to him next door. The castle is a must see!

The heart of Matsue city lies between Lake Shinji and the Nakaumi Inland Sea, so despite being an inland city, water is very much part of the cityscape. Today tourists can ride on the traditional low boats that were used to move products along the canal system, including around the castle area.

Shimane is proud to be home to a World Heritage Site. It may come as a surprise to Australians who readily think of Japan as a major destination for our natural resources that Shimane's World Heritage Site is a



The Oki Islands are also part of Shimane. They were once used to send people into exile, but today people visit to enjoy spectacular sights such as the red cliffs of Sekiheki.



silver mine, once one of the world's leading mines. The Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine (d) in Oda City is referred to as 'ancient remains', but the mine was actually active up until 1923. For just over four centuries it produced high quality silver (e). It's estimated that at one point in the 1500s approximately a third of all silver in circulation around the world came from Iwami Ginzan. It is valued as a world heritage site for the intact nature of the mines and the fact that it long co-existed within a beautifully treed environment (miners were careful not to overexploit the forests to burn wood for smelting).

No introduction to Shimane is complete without mentioning one of Japan's most important shrines, Izumo Taisha (f), in the west of the prefecture. October is called the month of no gods (*kanna-zuki*) throughout Japan except for in the Izumo region where it is the month of the gods (*kamiari-zuki*). That is because all the gods (*kami*) from around Japan are said to gather during this month at Izumo Taisha where they consider the fortunes of people for the year ahead.

The main sanctuary of Izumo Taisha, a national treasure, is built in a style called *taisha-zukuri*, the oldest shrine style in Japan. The shrine's sacred twisted rope (*shimenawa*) is surely Japan's most impressive!

Visit Shimane—<http://visitshimane.com> This Shimane Prefecture website has good information, including images and videos. To name just a few more points of interest, consider the Adachi Museum (Yasugi City) with its wonderful garden, Meimei-an teahouse (Matsue), Mihonoseki fishing port, and foods such as *izumo-soba* and traditional tea ceremony sweets.

PHOTO CREDITS: a, c & d © Shimane Prefectural Government / ©JNTO; b, e & f ©JNTO.