

奈良

Nara - celebrating the 1300th anniversary of Heijo-kyo

For anyone visiting Osaka or Kyoto with an interest in Japanese history, the nearby city of Nara should definitely be on your list of places to explore.

Nara is an ancient capital of Japan, older than Kyoto which is more widely known overseas as the former Japanese capital before Tokyo assumed the mantle.

In fact Nara was the first permanent capital of Japan; previously the capital or seat of government had moved with each new emperor. In 710CE, the city of Nara, then known as Heijo-kyo, became the capital of Japan until 784. In 2010, Nara celebrates the *1300th Anniversary of Nara Heijo-kyo Capital*.

The Nara Period (710-794) was a time when many cultural and religious ideas were absorbed from the Asian mainland. This included the layout of Heijo-kyo itself which was modelled on the Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an). During the Nara Period, several missions were sent to Tang China to trade and to learn the latest in technology and thinking. Buddhism became a major influence on the aristocracy at this time.

The Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1998. The monuments—temple and shrine complexes and the remains of the Heijo-kyo Palace—comprise the where's where of Nara's most famous sites and have long attracted tourists to the city, well before their UNESCO designation.

Todai-ji Temple is one of the best known World Heritage sites in Nara. The present Great Buddha Hall

(*Daibutsuden*) dates from 1709 and it houses the Great Buddha of Nara (*Nara Daibutsu*). The Daibutsu was completed in 752. However, it has been damaged and repaired on several occasions, and its current form dates from 1692.

There is no shortage of beautiful objects to see in Nara, as temples and shrines had their own treasure houses. Within the grounds of Todai-ji is the Shoso-in. This storehouse once protected precious items donated by the imperial family, firstly by Empress Komyo in 756. (The Shoso-in collection moved to a modern facility in 1963.) Kofuku-ji Temple, another UNESCO site, has a particularly fine collection of art. It includes priceless sculptures, national treasures that date back to around the time of Nara's foundation as Japan's capital.

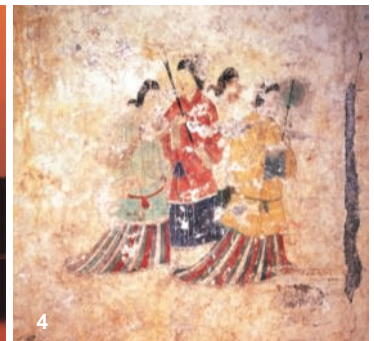
Kasuga Taisha Shrine is famous for its unique style of architecture *kasuga-zukuri*. Behind the grand shrine is Mt

Kasuga Primeval Forest. Due to its sacred status there are giant trees that are more than 400 years old.

Many of city's famous sites are set in Nara Park and it is very pleasant to wander from place to place. The park itself is home to hundreds of deer, considered to be messengers of the gods, which are free to roam at will.

There is much more to discover in Nara. Visit the websites below to learn more about this fascinating city.

Beyond the city, *Nara prefecture is home to several other important sites, including Horyu-ji which in 1993 was the first of Japan's World Heritage sites to be designated. This is another must-see. It was founded in the early 7th century by Prince Shotoku (574-622) who among other things is known for having written Japan's first constitution. The temple includes the oldest wooden structures in the world, dating from the late 7th to early 8th centuries.*



1. Todai-ji Daibutsuden. 2. Nara Daibutsu. 3. A famous view of Yakushiji Temple seen over the water— the temple is in the west of Nara city and its buildings are constructed in a range of styles reflecting the periods of Japanese history. Only the eastern pagoda completed in 730 has escaped the trials of time. 4. Excavated in 1972, these murals from the Takamatsuzuka Tomb in Asuka, south of Nara city, date from around 700CE and are a rare Japanese example of imagery found in sets of tomb paintings in China and other parts of East Asia.

JNTO travel information on Nara and its many attractions
Nara Prefectural website
Japan's World Heritage sites at Web Japan
Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute

www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/nara/index.html
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