

佐渡 Sado Island

Lying off the coast of Niigata is Japan's fifth largest island—Sado Island. Say the name to Japanese people and most will think of gold. It also played an important role in history as an island of exile; medieval rulers would banish people to the island. These people were often aristocrats and intellectuals and they brought their culture with them, with some interesting results.

One such exile was Zeami, a founder of the 600-year-old Noh theatre tradition. It is surprising to learn that almost a third of all Noh stages in Japan are to be found on Sado Island. Unlike on the mainland where Noh was first

heavily patronised by samurai and later the aristocracy, Noh became a pastime of the common people on Sado Island. Today there are some thirty Noh stages (competition between village communities is said to have given rise to the high number) and in summer there are many performances of Takigi Noh or Noh by firelight (see photos c & d).

Other performing arts are strong on the island. A local traditional dance Sado Okesa is well known in Japan. The island also has its own puppetry tradition. In the second half of the twentieth century, the island became famous for Japanese taiko drumming and is home to the

world-renowned Kodo Taiko Drumming Troupe. These are living traditions as attested by the success of the annual summer festival Earth Celebration. First

held in 1988, it continues and develops the performing arts tradition of the island.

Being a beautiful island no doubt helps attract the visitors. The island is comprised of two mountain ranges and has some stunning coast lines. Mass displays such as the daylilies at Onogame (b) delight nature lovers. Sado has its

share of cherry blossom beauty spots and the ancient cherry trees at Kaichoji Temple are Old Imperial Palace cherry trees planted by the retired Emperor Juntoku who was exiled to Sado after the Jokyu uprising in 1221. Now of a venerable age, the trees still bloom every year in late April (e) and have well outlived the goldmines that made Sado so famous.

The mines ceased operation in 1989 having been active for just under four centuries. There is now a gold mine museum (g) within the largest abandoned mine complex. In fact, silver was also mined here. The Sado Island mines were an important source of income for the Tokugawa Shogunate during the Edo period. While the conditions were tough, the industry did bring prosperity to the island.

Today the mines provide a different kind of treasure. Red clay from the mines are used to create the local mu-myoi pottery. By Japanese standards this ceramic tradition is young, having been started in 1819. Mu-myoi is known for its beautiful natural colours. Rich in iron oxides, the clay fires to become a very hard ceramic and objects gain lustre with use.

Formerly an island of exiles and hard to travel to, nowadays Sado is easily reached from Niigata city, itself only two hours from Tokyo by shinkansen. From Niigata to the island, there are several ferries including a high-speed link that takes an hour. Once on Sado Island, you might like to try a much slower boat-trip and be charmed by the tarai-bune (a), a traditional tub-like fishing boat.

Further information

Sado Tourism Association—www.visitsado.com—extensive information about things to see and do in Sado. Accommodation, island transport, places to eat and hotspots are all covered by this well illustrated site.



a



b



c



e



d



f



g

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