

The Hidden Christian Sites of the Nagasaki Region

Japan's latest UNESCO World Heritage Site

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) works to encourage the identification, preservation and protection of cultural and natural heritage around the world. UNESCO World Heritage Sites are of universal significance, and as such, these cultural and natural world heritage sites do not belong to any one single country—they are part of the world's heritage.

Japan is fortunate to be the custodian of 18 cultural world heritage sites and four natural sites. These sites are a precious resource for all people. The latest Japanese cultural heritage to be inscribed as a World Heritage Site, the Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region tell a little known part of Japan's history and speak of humanity's quest to preserve spiritual meaning in daily life.

Nagasaki on the island of Kyushu has a long history of contact with European countries. Portuguese traders were the first to arrive in 1543. Catholic missionaries, who mainly accompanied Portuguese and Spanish traders, actively introduced Christianity to Japan, most famously the Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier, who arrived in 1549.

Catholic communities became firmly established in the Nagasaki region, but the early success of missionaries was to be short-lived. The Tokugawa Shogunate expelled missionaries, controlled their activities, and finally persecuted them. In 1614 Christianity itself was banned and was to remain so for more than two hundred years.

That proved not to be the end of the story for Christians in Japan. Nor did they give up without a fight as the 1637 Shimabara-Amakusa Rebellion testifies. The remains of Hara Castle where Catholics took up arms in rebellion against the local lord is part of the UNESCO listing.

Believers continued to gather and practise their religion. Indeed, some Catholics in the Nagasaki region developed their own unique religious system during the more than two centuries that Christianity was prohibited. People practised their faith in secret, while seeking to live alongside mainstream society. For example, a Maria Kannon statue was a way of worshipping Mother Mary while looking at an image of Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy.

Sometimes it was the land itself that helped preserve the faith of the Hidden Christian communities. Not only did migration to more remote islands



Kasuga Village and Sacred Places in Hirado

Photo by Higurashi Yuichi



A Maria Kannon Statue from Eiri Village
(housed in Dozaki Church Christian Archive Centre)



Ono Church in Ono Village, Sotome

Photo by Higurashi Yuichi

form part of the process of preserving Christian communities, natural landmarks were also venerated. For example in Kasuga Village [pictured top photo], local people considered a mountain, an island and other natural sites as sacred. Other groups used everyday objects as items of worship. Yet others combined their Christian faith with Shinto practices. Each community found its own way to preserve their faith.

The most obvious signs of Christian communities, church buildings, are in fact a sign of the final stage of the Hidden Christians' history, when communities were able to reveal themselves and build their own places of worship, such as the Ono Church below.

It was a gradual process before all the Hidden Christian communities came out. Catholic priests returned to Japan when the country reopened to trade with the West in 1854, but in fact, the prohibition against Christianity was only lifted in 1873. So, what happened to the various Hidden Christian communities? It was mixed. Some congregations rejoined the Catholic church. Others converted to Shintoism and Buddhism. Yet others preferred to follow their own practices developed during the period their communities were truly Hidden Christians.

There are twelve components that comprise "The Hidden Christian Sites of the Nagasaki Region" and they all reveal something of the fascinating history of the Hidden Christians of the Nagasaki Region.

The UNESCO inscription is expected to lead to an increase in visitor numbers. Being places of worship, there are rules that visitors are requested to observe. See the website below for details.

Learn more about The Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region at

<http://kirishitan.jp/en>