

日光の社寺 The Shrines and Temples of Nikko

Just two hours north of central Tokyo lies a true jewel in the crown of Japan's national treasures—the natural and man-made splendour to be found at Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture. One of Japan's earlier UNESCO World Heritage inscriptions, the shrines and temples of Nikko were recognised for their outstanding universal value in 1999. The inscription encompasses 103 buildings spread over Futarasan-jinja shrine (23 buildings), Toshogu shrine (42) and Rinno-ji temple (38).

The area has a long tradition of worship, specifically as a centre of Shugendo which is a sect of Buddhism whose main ritual is 'entering the mountain'. When you see the beautiful forest-clad mountain location of the shrines and temples of Nikko, you begin to understand the connection with the natural environment that is integral to the UNESCO listing.

The star attraction is the Toshogu complex which was built to house the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868). The buildings are considered a perfect illustration of Edo Period temple and shrine architecture. If you are thinking of the restrained aesthetic of raked Zen gardens and constructions of plain wood and white walls, think again. At Toshogu, there is a flamboyant exuberance, realised through amazing carved surfaces, highly coloured carvings which are further highlighted with gold.

Centuries of worship

Nikko has served as a spiritual centre since the 8th century when the first buildings were constructed there by a Buddhist monk. The majority of the buildings existing today are much later, many built in the 17th century including the Toshogu shrine.

From the beginning, the mountains and forests held a sacred meaning, and while there are ancient trees, many of the towering Japanese cedar you see were planted when the Toshogu shrine was built. The route from Nikko City to Nikko Toshogu is lined with 15,000 cedar trees planted in the 17th century and is now a national monument.

The very placement of the shrine buildings was carefully considered; paths and stairs follow the natural topography allowing the buildings to be arranged "in a pleasing balance to create a solemn, religious atmosphere".*

Wonderful craftsmanship

The techniques used to build the shrine buildings were state of the art for the time, and the structures themselves have proved durable and resistant. However, to maintain the splendour of the ornate and vivid decorations [photo a] regular work has always been required to renew lacquer, paint and metalwork. Traditional techniques are still used and a

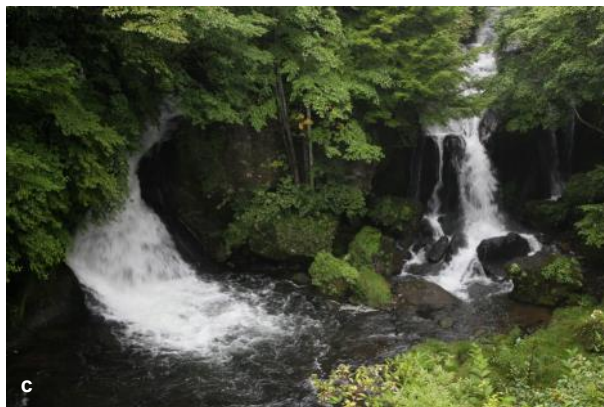
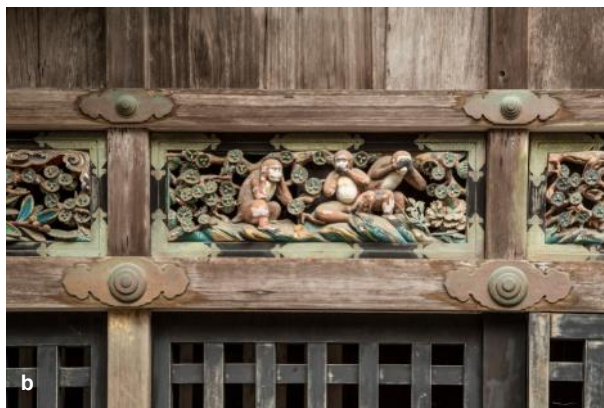


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Heisei restoration program was begun in 2007 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of Tokugawa Ieyasu. This continuous process is itself part of the reason for the UNESCO recognition.

The Sanzaru monkeys

The magnificent Yomeimon gateway at Toshogu has more than 300 dazzling carvings of animals, mythical beasts and human figures, but it is the Sacred Stable (Shinkyusha) building that has surely the most famous carving—the three wise monkeys or Sanzaru which "See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil" [b]. Be sure to look out for the Nemuri-neko or sleeping cat, which is a designated National Treasure, and two wonderfully imaginative elephants.

Experiencing Nikko and beyond

Try putting your camera or phone away for a while. There are so many photo-worthy carvings and sights that it would be easy to go overboard. Yes, record and share your experiences with others, but do try to take your time and just look and absorb your surroundings. 'Entering the mountain' should be a type of pilgrimage, a way to go from the everyday world into the spiritual.

Take your time. Nikko is possible as a daytrip from Tokyo, but nature lovers in particular might like to consider a longer stay and go further afield to explore the beauty of the national park [c]. There are also excellent *onsen* hot springs to enjoy in Tochigi.

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NIKKO TOSHOGU SHRINE

www.toshogu.jp/english/

* www.toshogu.jp/english/shrine/index.html Accessed 27/06/2019