

World Heritage Site: Itsukushima — a ‘floating’ shrine

Japan's UNESCO World Heritage sites include some of the country's most popular travel destinations today. Some sites have become famous internationally after receiving World Heritage recognition, for example the beautiful villages of Shirakawago and Gokayama with their distinctive gassho-style houses as pictured on the cover. Other sites have long appeared in tourist guides on Japan—a veritable icon is the ‘floating’ shrine of Itsukushima, which was inscribed as a World Heritage site in 1996.

Better known by the name of the island, Miyajima, the shrine is famous for its vermillion painted torii gate standing in the Setonaikai Inland sea. The torii is so well known, it is almost a cliché, but don't let that deter you. You would be missing out.

Itsukushima Shrine with its imposing torii gate is traditionally considered one of Japan's three most scenic spots or 日本三景 (Nihon Sankei), and to this day, the shrine delights visitors with its changing appearance as the tides ebb in and out under the cluster of pavilions that make up the Main Hall of Itsukushima Shrine. The shrine at high tide truly appears to float. At low tide, it is possible to walk out to the very foot of the magnificent torii.

A sacred island

Since ancient times the island of Itsukushima has been an important Shinto site—Shinto being the native religion of Japan. You will also find Buddhist temples on the island, reflecting the merging of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs that developed in Japan. The first shrine is believed to have been built as far back as the late 6th century.

Spiritually significant for centuries, it rose to national prominence more than eight centuries ago, when a powerful warrior and courtier Taira no Kiyomori (1118-81) became a worshipper at the shrine. Out of gratitude for the success he achieved, he had Itsukushima Shrine renovated. The buildings were constructed in the Shinden-zukuri style of Heian Period (794-1185) court buildings. Although many of the buildings have been rebuilt in later eras, they remain largely as in Kiyomori's time. Indeed, it is this integrity of its original design that makes Itsukushima so remarkable.

The famous O-torii or the Grand Torii Gate is now in its 8th incarnation (1875). Its present style is said to date from when it was rebuilt in 1594. And what about that colour? The stunning bright orange-red of the O-torii and the shrine is thought to ward off evil spirits. The five-storeyed pagoda (below) shares the same colour and dates from 1407.



Not just for day trips

At its closest point, Miyajima lies only 500 metres from the Honshu mainland and the city of Hiroshima. Most visitors travel to Miyajima as a day-trip from Hiroshima, but it is well worth considering at least an overnight stay on the island, to enjoy the quiet of the island and the shrine in the morning and evening. There is plenty to fill in a day or two. Mt Misen is 535 metres tall and is also regarded as sacred. You can walk to the summit for beautiful views of the island and out over the sea to the city of Hiroshima. There's also a cable car for a more relaxed way to get to the top.

Staying overnight gives more opportunity to sample some of the island's food. Oysters and eel would be good choices for dinner. The local version of okonomiyaki is another option. The *momiji manju* or maple-leaf shaped, bean-paste filled cakes are the favourite sweet on the island and make for a great souvenir. You'll see them everywhere!



Take a virtual tour of Itsukushima Shrine at www.miyajima.or.jp/english/

This Miyajima Tourist Association website is very informative, explaining the history and significance of the site well. It also has many beautiful images to inspire.

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