Teradomari

This area has been a hub for both trading and religious activities since before the Edo period (1603–1867). As the nearest point on the Honshu coastline to Sado Island, Teradomari acted as a bridge between the islanders and the rest of Japan. Merchant vessels known as *kitamae-bune* (“northern-bound ships”) would ferry goods and people back and forth. Two prominent trading routes, the Hokkoku Kaido (Highway) to Shinano (now Nagano) and the Mikuni Kaido (toward Takasaki in present-day Gunma Prefecture), also ran from Teradomari to some of the country’s largest centers of commerce.

A number of shrines and temples flourished in Teradomari, some of which have great historical significance. Its mix of bustling trade and lively cultural activity, set against a backdrop of temples and shrines, earned the town the nickname “the Kamakura of Northern Japan.” Kamakura refers to the seat of the first samurai government in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, a city located near modern-day Yokohama.

Today, Teradomari is perhaps best known for its fish market and the first-class seafood restaurants along its waterfront. However, the area offers more than just a delicious lunch: the nearby temples and shrines are all within comfortable walking distance of the waterfront, and a network of staircases and walking paths allows easy access.

Shomyoji Temple

This temple is most commonly associated with Ryokan, a well-known Zen Buddhist monk and poet. Ryokan traveled frequently but came to live at Shomyoji at three significant points in his life.

At the age of 45, he spent time here writing poetry and the famous works of calligraphy that he would give to the poor or those who had helped him. He returned to the temple twice more, when he was 70 and 72.

The original temple buildings were destroyed during a fire in 1841, but were rebuilt in 1933. Today, Shomyoji is designated a Cultural Property (Historic Site) of Nagaoka.

The Shukan-En Garden

This elegant garden was part of the estate owned by the Igarashi family, a powerful clan whose lineage traced back to the eleventh or twelfth century. Their residence burned down during the Boshin War (1868–1869) and the garden was constructed in its place.

Toward the rear of the garden is a monument to Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189) and Musashibo Benkei (1155–1189). Known popularly as Yoshitsune and Benkei, these two prominent local warriors stayed with the Igarashi family for a time. Their adventures together form the basis for many old Japanese folktales. You can see a well here that Benkei is said to have used, according to one such tale.

In the park, there is a large stone monument with an inscription that time has unfortunately rendered illegible. The monument dates back seven hundred years, and was originally inscribed with the lyrics to verses that poet Fujiwara Tamekane (1254–1332) wrote for his great love, Hatsukimi, in the thirteenth century.

Shirayamahime Shrine

This shrine is dedicated to two Shinto female deities linked to maritime safety: Izanami no Mikoto and Kukurihime no Mikoto. Sailors and fishermen often offer prayers here before heading off to sea. Visitors will notice the highly detailed dragon patterns painted into the shrine’s ceiling. Dragons serve as guardians of seafarers.

The shrine’s exact year of construction is unknown due to lost records and repeated rebuilding throughout its history. We do know, however, that the current structure dates back to 1771.

Nimen Shrine

Tradition holds that a fisherman named Heisaburo built this shrine in 1391, after having a prophetic dream in which he was ordered to seek out a god trapped in the ocean. The next day, he went to the nearby shore, and upon searching underwater, found a statue of an unknown deity with two faces (*nimen*), one male and one female. That same statue still sits inside the shrine to this day.

The inside of the shrine is only open during the autumn and spring festivals, when the male and female faces, respectively, are unveiled.

Nimen Shrine is located on the grounds of Shirayamahime Shrine.

Funaema (Ship Artwork)

Fifty-two artworks dedicated to the trading and fishing ships that served Teradomari in the past are housed within the main worship hall of Shirayamahime Shrine. Made during the Edo period (1603–1867) and the Meiji era (1868–1912), the earliest example dates from 1774, with the last being dedicated in 1889.

These important works of art are useful for those studying the history of the *kitamae-bune* ships and the Teradomari area. In 1970, the ship artwork was designated an Important Cultural Property. It is housed in the storage hall for safekeeping.

Shotokuji Temple

This temple relocated from Ishikawa Prefecture to Teradomari in 1593. Its garden dates from the middle of the Edo period. With the backing of many parishioners, it was designed by a gardener from Kyoto and utilized rocks shipped from Osaka.

Theships sailing along the Kitamae route along the northern coast, also known as *sengokubune* (“thousand rice bales ships”), brought both the gardener and the rocks to Teradomari. The stroll garden takes full advantage of the undulations in the terrain.

The precincts of Shotokuji, a small temple in the garden, affords a fine vista over the coastline below. On a clear day, you can even see as far as Sado Island.

The garden is a designated Cultural Property of the city of Nagaoka.

Yosenji Temple

This temple was built in 1594 by a monk from Jokoji Temple in Shinano Province (present-day Nagano Prefecture). The monk was a vassal of the powerful daimyo lord Takeda Shingen (1521–1573). He likely became a monk after his master died.

The garden, which is known for its beautiful autumn foliage, affords vistas of Teradomari and Sado Island. Visitors can book advance tours of the temple and enjoy events such as traditional dance performances that are held there periodically.

Hofukuji Temple

Hofukuji is the oldest temple in the area, dating from the year 757, and belongs to the Nichiren sect of Buddhism. Visitors are welcome to tour the temple grounds and gardens. Reservations are required to see the inside of the temple.

Nichiren Statue

Nichiren (1222–1282) is one of the most prominent figures in Japan’s religious history. He was a scholar who founded his own sect of Buddhism. This statue, erected in 1964, is an homage to his seven-day stay in Teradomari while waiting for a transport ship bound for Sado Island, to which he had been exiled.

A letter he wrote at that time to one of his disciples in Kazusa Province (present-day Chiba Prefecture) is known today as a sacred scripture called the “Teradomari Gosho” (Letter from Teradomari).