

Ise-Shima National Park (long version)

Ise-Shima National Park covers central Mie Prefecture, including most of the Shima Peninsula. It spans a vast area of almost 60,000 hectares. The inland area of the park boasts gentle mountain slopes and lush green forests that surround Ise Jingu, Japan's most important *jinja* (Shinto shrine) complex. Its precincts are seen as the heart of Japanese spirituality. The topographically varied coastline ranges from rugged outcrops to ancient rock ledges and sandy beaches. Unlike most national parks, Ise-Shima has a relatively large proportion of private land, and significant populations in four cities: Ise City, Toba City, Shima City, and Minami-Ise Town. The lives, history, culture, and customs of Ise-Shima's people are deeply connected to the park's natural landscapes. Since ancient times, they have lived with nature and respected the environment.

Ise Jingu nestles in protected forests. The *jinja* complex was founded about 2,000 years ago. It is at the heart of Japan's Shinto religion. The precinct buildings include the Naiku, which enshrines Amaterasu-Omikami, the sun deity and ancestor of the imperial family, and Geku, which enshrines Toyouke-no-Omikami (the deity of food, clothing, and shelter), as well as 125 affiliated *jinja* in the Ise-Shima area.

With the verdant trees and the clear waters of the Isuzugawa River, it is easy to see why this area was chosen as a sanctuary for deities. Ise-Shima's rivers bring nutrients from the forest down to the sea. This fertile natural environment means that Ise-Shima's seafood has had a reputation for high quality since ancient times when it was served to the imperial family. Today, Ise-Shima's seafood continues to be renowned, and thousands of ancient ceremonies giving thanks to the deities continue to be performed.

The importance of conserving abundant sea-life populations can be seen in the many rules observed by communities of female divers known as *ama*. Ise-Shima's *ama*, who harvest various types of seaweed and shellfish from the ocean floor (without the aid of breathing apparatus), are thought to have been a part of the region's history for at least 3,000 years. Many areas have their own *ama* community who have strict rules concerning diving and harvesting practices. In general, abalone can be harvested only if they are over 10.6 cm long. If the abalone is bigger than this, the size indicates that it is over three years old, and has had a chance to breed at least once. The locations where *ama* can dive, and permitted times, are strictly regulated. Such rules have allowed *ama* to harvest shellfish and seaweed sustainably for centuries. Ise-Shima National Park offers the chance to observe the divers and their ancient customs firsthand. Visitors can also enjoy fresh seafood caught and cooked by an *ama* in one of their huts. There is also an activity program allowing visitors to dive with an *ama*.

More recently, *satoyama* and *satoumi* conservation movements have adopted the ancient idea of living alongside and respecting nature. *Satoyama* is a Japanese term for an area of land where people work to conserve local ecosystems, ensuring that the natural environment is used in a sustainable way.

Likewise, *satoumi* refers to a marine area which is managed similarly. Visitors can gain an understanding of this way of thinking themselves by joining one of the many eco-tourism activities. These include cycling tours, guided walking tours of island fishing communities, hiking along nature trails, exploring the inlets of Ago Bay's intricate coast or other bays by sea kayak, bird watching, and last, but certainly not least, observing the myriad stars that are visible here at night.