

Minami Yamashiro

Minami Yamashiro is an area in southern Kyoto Prefecture. It is a picturesque locale with green, rolling hills and the sedate Kizu River flowing through its center. Minami Yamashiro is an ancient area of Kyoto that today includes the cities and towns of Kyotanabe, Ujitahara, Kizugawa, Seika, Kasagi, Wazuka, and the village of Minamiyamashiro. In the past, many traveling and trade routes ran through this area.

Minami Yamashiro is renowned for its tranquility and for the quality tea harvested from its lush tea fields. Along the river, there are also small but notable temples, many of which have origins that date back over a thousand years. While some are so small as to comprise only a main hall amidst an expanse of nature, many are home to National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties of striking beauty and historic value. Minami Yamashiro is worth a visit even just for the unexpected finds that can be discovered in its ever-changing scenery.

History

Minami Yamashiro is a scenic area in which various important and influential figures in Japanese history have lived or spent significant amounts of time. Empress Genmei (660–721), for example, had a private villa here, in Mikanohara. Emperor Shomu (701–756) actually moved the imperial residence to Mikanohara some time later. This area was renamed Kunikyo and, for a short time, it was the capital city of Japan.

Before the implementation of dams to prevent flooding, Kizu River was a waterway and fostered a prosperous transport trade. The *Man'yōshū*, the oldest existing collection of Japanese poetry, which was compiled in the eighth century, has a section detailing the process of collecting materials needed for various (now famous) temples of Nara from Minami Yamashiro and transporting them downstream to Izumi River Port. From there, they were brought on land and then taken to Nara Prefecture. It is thought that this practical function gave rise to the name of Kizu River: *ki* means “wood” or “materials” and *zu* means “port.” The Kizu River has thus played an important role throughout history shaping the politics, economics, culture, and religion of the Minami Yamashiro region. Although it has since narrowed and become shallower, Kizu was once fierce enough to flood and wash away nearby buildings.

The Charm of Minami Yamashiro

Minami Yamashiro has a subtle, yet undeniable, charm that reveals itself only upon closer inspection. The many temples located in this area were founded in the early days of Japan, in the Asuka (552–645) and Nara periods (710–794). Recent archeological excavations have revealed Minami Yamashiro's early ties with Buddhism.

In ancient times, Minami Yamashiro was at the crossroads of important transportation routes, and travelers would often stop by the temples for lodging and to offer up prayers. Nowadays, they house rare Buddhist statues of immeasurable value, which visitors can view upon request, and are bastions for the preservation of Nara-period Buddhism.