

## **Unzen as a Religious Center: Spirituality in the Mountains**

The mountains of Unzen have long held a special spiritual appeal. Kyushu's setting as the nearest point in Japan to the Asian continent meant that the island has often been the entry point for imported products and ideas, from pottery styles to religious thought. Buddhism made its way to Japan in the sixth century, and was introduced to the Unzen area by the monk Gyoki in 701, when he founded Manmyoji Temple. As in most areas of Japan, Buddhism's precepts and the pantheon of deities were accepted quite naturally and managed to coexist along with the indigenous nature worship that was developing into the Shinto religion. The closeness of the two religions is illustrated by the proximity of the places of worship in Unzen, the Shinto shrine being just across the road from the Buddhist temple.

### **Clash of cultures**

When Christianity made its way to Kyushu in the mid-sixteenth century, it was also welcomed at first, and soon there was a large number of converts, including high-level officials on the Shimabara Peninsula. But unlike with Buddhism, it was not an easy melding of beliefs, and conflicts were soon the norm. Christians saw other religions' places and objects of worship—such as temples, shrines, and the stone statues of Buddhist deities—as sacrilegious and would disfigure or destroy them. The Christian daimyo Arima Harunobu ordered over forty large and small Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples completely destroyed. Converts were also encouraged to take Western names and to adopt Western culture. As the conversions increased, so did friction.