

Tashibu no Sho: A Thriving Ancient Landscape

Stone artifacts are not all that have withstood the march of time in Bungo Takada. A short drive from the city center lies the picturesque valley of Tashibu no Sho, where, as ancient maps can attest, the landscape has changed little over the past millennium. Protected by the steep slopes of the surrounding mountains, rice paddies in irregular, rounded patterns follow the natural contours of the land on a slow descent down the valley slope, creating a photogenic panorama. The district was once the feudal estate of Usa Shrine, where the harvested rice was offered to the gods.

Natural and Sustainable

Several unique characteristics of the local farming methods have led to this peninsula being designated as a World Agricultural Heritage site, including a network of reservoirs that were developed to store water. The oak tree forests surrounding the valley have long acted as both an enriching agent and a natural filter for rainfall, and are a fine place for cultivating *shiitake* mushrooms, which help fertilize the soil. (On walks through the forest shade, you'll notice stacks of logs where the mushrooms are being grown.) The natural systems developed over the centuries are still used today to maintain a sustainable system of agriculture.

Following the Bodhisattva's Gaze

To appreciate the beauty and the layout of the rice farms, visitors are encouraged to walk around the valley for views from different perspectives. At the westernmost point of the valley is the *torii* gate of Amabiki Shrine, from which a spring once irrigated all the rice paddies below. But save the best for last: a short hike up a narrow trail on the eastern side of the valley leads to two outlooks with fabulous views over the entire ecosystem. They are named after the statues of the bodhisattva Kannon that watch over the valley from depressions carved out of the cliff face: on the eastern side, Asahi (sunrise); on the western, Yuhi (sunset). Kannon, often called the Goddess of Mercy, is a bodhisattva, beings who has postponed their own enlightenment to stay behind and help others. It's hard not to believe that this pristine area's survival can be traced to the deities' benevolent gaze.