

Fukiji Temple

The main hall of Fukiji Temple was built in the late Heian period (794–1185) to host a statue of Amida Nyorai, the Buddhist deity who invites believers to paradise. It is a National Treasure and the oldest wooden structure still standing in Kyushu. The temple is guarded by two fearsome-looking *nio* guardians at the gate and two massive trees—nutmeg on the left, ginkgo on the right—at the top of the steps. The building itself is built of the wood of the nutmeg tree, as is the Buddhist statue inside, and the sweeping roof design is meant to represent the shape of a phoenix, one of the sacred animals of Buddhism. The interior was originally adorned with vivid colors, with detailed paintings covering much of the walls and columns, and the Amida statue was covered in brilliant gold leaf. Worshippers would circle Amida in a clockwise direction, overseen by the heavenly figures painted high up on the surrounding walls. (Most of them are still faintly visible.) In later years, a more sober and refined aesthetic was introduced to Japanese art and architecture with the influence of Zen and the tea ceremony, and lavishly decorated temples such as Fukiji were left to take on a timeless worn and faded patina.

The Legend of the Nutmeg Tree

Long, long ago, a huge nutmeg tree once grew in this quaint valley of butterbur in Tashibu. The tree was so large, it was said, that its shadow reached all the way to the river in the morning, and all the way to the rice fields in the evening.

One day, the legendary Buddhist monk Ninmon decided to consecrate this spot as sacred ground and ordered the building of a hall to enshrine an image of the Amida Buddha. But when it came time for the woodcutters to cut down the huge nutmeg tree for wood to build the temple, a very odd thing happened. No matter how much they cut, the next day they would return to find the tree in its previous state. Perplexed, the woodcutters didn't know what to do. Then one day, they were told by a local plant whose view of the sun was blocked by the tree, "At the end of every day, burn the sawdust that comes from your cutting, and the tree will eventually come down." Thanks to that advice, the woodcutters were finally able to fell the tree and continue construction. Following Ninmon's orders, a large temple was built and a Buddhist image carved, all from the single nutmeg tree.

This structure is the National Treasure known as Fukiji Temple. Today, many people feel spiritually close to this place, and a large nutmeg tree still grows on the grounds.