

Fukiji Temple

The approach

As you climb the first steps on the approach to the gates of Fukiji Temple, notice the indentations in the stones. At one time, these held oil that was lit to illuminate the entrance at night, and it must have been a magical sight.

Halfway up the steps, on both sides of the wooden main gate, are fearsome stone deities standing guard. These are called *mio*, and were probably made much later than when the temple was built. They were carved out of the local stone, which is remarkably soft, and ideal for statuary. The one on the right has his mouth open to pronounce the sound “*a*” and the one on the left has his closed to pronounce the sound “*un*.” The phrase “*a-un*” is a Buddhist concept representing the beginning and end of all things, similar to the Biblical use of the Greek “alpha” and “omega.”

You’ll notice many examples of stone carving artistry all over this peninsula: in temples, by the side of the road—even in people’s private gardens. The stone in this area is ideal for carving, and it is said that some 70 percent of the country’s stone Buddhist statues can be found on the Kunisaki Peninsula. Although the surface of the stone guardians of Fukiji Temple has become worn and discolored, this matches the overall aesthetic of the temple today.

Amida Hall

The Fukiji Odo main hall, a building of subdued beauty, is very important to Kunisaki’s Buddhist heritage. It was built in the late Heian period (794–1185) as a hall to host the Buddhist deity Amida, who invites true believers to paradise. There are two large trees at the top of the steps: the one on the left is nutmeg; the one on the right is ginkgo. The graceful curves of the roof are meant to resemble a phoenix, one of Buddhism’s sacred animals.

The building is a National Treasure and the oldest wooden structure still standing in Kyushu. It is made of the wood of the nutmeg tree, one that legend says was over 3,000 meters tall. The legend goes on to say that woodsmen had a hard time cutting it down, because each night it would return to its former shape. But they eventually were able to fell it, and thus finish the temple. Today, the variety of the trees in the grounds help surround the temple in beauty year-round.

The interior

The appearance of the interior today is very different from when it was built. Most of the surface then was covered in paintings done in bright colors: reds, yellows, blues, and greens. The statue of Amida, which is 86 centimeters tall and also made of the wood of the nutmeg tree, was covered entirely in gold leaf. It must have been a stunning sight in the light filtering in under the low eaves.

Even the bare wooden columns that you see were once covered in intricate paintings, and the wall behind the statue featured a heavenly landscape. People who came to worship would circle the hallway around the statue in a clockwise direction as they said their prayers. Once your eyes have adjusted to the darkness, look up to where the walls meet the ceiling and you can catch a glimpse of many heavenly figures, though the paintings have faded over the years.

In later years, this kind of lavish decoration lost favor, and a more refined and sober style of art and architecture became popular throughout the country. It was thought that buildings like this one should show their years of wear and tear, and Fukiji Odo is a perfect example of the sublime beauty that has resulted from this aesthetic.