

Nikko: A City Steeped in History

Extending back more than 1,200 years, Nikko's religious history has a deep connection to nature. The mountains in this region have been considered sacred since at least the eighth century, when the revered monk and mountain ascetic Shodo Shonin (735–817) arrived here. Shodo Shonin founded a syncretic Shinto-Buddhist community, which developed over the centuries into the shrines and temples of present-day Nikko.

The buildings of Nikko's shrine-temple complex that stand today were built in the first half of the seventeenth century. The first major event in this chapter of Nikko's history was the enshrinement of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), founder of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867). The Main Shrine and most of the other buildings of Toshogu Shrine were completed a few years after his death. Most of the buildings of Futarasan Jinja Shrine and Rinnoji Temple were also built before 1650. Taiyuin Mausoleum was completed in 1653 and is the final resting place of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu (1604–1651).

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan signed diplomatic and commercial treaties with a number of Western nations, and several embassies built summer resorts on the shores of Lake Chuzenji. Foreign diplomats were drawn to the area by its natural beauty and cool summer temperatures. They were visited here by members of the Japanese imperial family and Japanese government officials in such great numbers that it was said at the time that Japan's Foreign Affairs Office moved to Nikko during the summer.