

Itsukushima Shrine

Many visitors to this Shinto shrine will be familiar with the iconic image of its red torii gate standing in the water off Miyajima Island, the verdant Mt. Misen as a backdrop. Still, seeing the shrine in person elicits audible gasps of awe even from those who know it from pictures. It was designated a World Heritage Site in 1996.

Itsukushima is a shrine complex that contains a main (inner) shrine made up of 37 buildings, as well as an outer shrine with a further 19 buildings located on both sides of the shore. Itsukushima is said to originally have been constructed in 593 CE, and the warlord Taira no Kiyomori undertook further work on the shrine from 1168. The main hall was later renovated, and the torii gate and arched bridge were reconstructed by the Mohri family in the late sixteenth century. Itsukushima literally means “island of worship,” reflecting the fact that Miyajima Island itself has for centuries been worshipped as the abode of the divine.

Itsukushima and its torii gate are unique in Japan for the way the tide swells and recedes beneath them. At high tide, the complex seems to float on the surface of the water. At low tide, Itsukushima takes on a different, yet equally captivating, appearance: three ponds appear in the surrounding sands, acting as “mirrors,” and it is possible for visitors to walk right up to the torii gate.