

Ryugenji Mine Shaft

Ryugenji is the most significant of the more than 900 mine shafts that have been discovered at Iwami Ginzan. One of the top five in terms of the quantity of silver extracted, it is about 600 meters long, with the first 273 meters now open to visitors year-round. The shaft was dug in 1715 and placed under the administration of the local magistrate, who was appointed by the central government in Edo (present-day Tokyo). The silver mined at Ryugenji was a direct source of income for the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled Japan between 1603 and 1867.

Several smaller shafts branch out from the main tunnel. These were dug to follow the veins of silver, traces of which are still visible here and there along the walls. The secondary shafts are much narrower than the main passage, which was expanded in the latter half of the nineteenth century to accommodate carts. Mine shafts that predate the introduction of modern drilling equipment are very narrow. The tunnels were dug using only chisels and hammers, which was extremely time-consuming, so they are just wide enough for miners to squeeze through.

As you leave, using the exit tunnel dug in 1989 to open the mine to tourists, look for the information panels featuring reproductions of Edo period (1603–1867) drawings used to describe the functions of the mine to government officials.