

## **Omori Ginzan Historic District**

The town of Omori has functioned as the administrative and commercial hub of Iwami Ginzan since the early 1600s. This was when the Tokugawa clan, which by 1603 had vanquished most of its rival warlords and founded the shogunate that was to rule Japan until 1867, established an office for its magistrate in charge of local affairs at the foot of the mountain. A town sprang up around the magistrate's office, with merchants and samurai moving in to satisfy the office's demand for goods and services. This created further employment opportunities, and the town's population continued to increase.

### *Diverse Townscape*

Omori's relatively small area and sudden development resulted in a peculiarly mixed urban structure, with the houses of samurai, tradespeople, and commoners, along with shrines and temples, intermingling in close proximity. This was a rarity in feudal Japan, where the social classes usually lived in separate neighborhoods. Although most of the town was destroyed in a fire in 1800, this patchwork distribution of land remains the distinguishing feature of Omori. Walking through the town, you will see that the former samurai residences have gardens between the houses and the street, whereas most shops and multiple-unit dwellings front on the thoroughfare. In the Edo period (1603–1867), gardens were a sign of status, but they could also be used for practical purposes: some of the samurai households built small structures in the gardens and rented them to bring in additional income.

### *Red Tiles and Plum Trees*

Omori is also known for the red tiles used on many of the town's roofs. Made from the iron-rich clay found in the area, these *sekishu-kawara* ("Sekishu tiles"; Sekishu is another name for the Iwami area) are common throughout the Chugoku region, where Shimane Prefecture is located. Looking out over the town from above, you will notice that many of the larger buildings have gray roofs. Such structures tend to be traditional samurai residences or administrative facilities; gray tiles were favored by the warrior class as a symbol of authority. Another visual feature of the town is its *ume* plum trees, many of which were planted when the silver mine was still active. Miners believed that the citric acid in pickled plums would help them stay alert in the dusty shafts, so they would stick these fruit inside their masks when they entered the mines.

### *Visiting Omori Today*

Although the town of Omori has been designated a historic district and is protected from development, some of the old buildings have been put to innovative uses. A good example is Gungendo, a shop, cafe, and gallery housed in a renovated Edo-period farmhouse, where you can purchase clothing and local food, view artwork, and sit down for lunch or a snack while gazing at the garden.

Omori is a historic town that is happy to welcome visitors as long as its residents' privacy and way of life are respected. Please refrain from entering homes or taking pictures of the residents without permission.