

Introduction to Munakata Taisha

Munakata Taisha on the north coast of Kyushu, has a rich history stretching back more than 1,500 years and played a major role in trade and diplomatic relations between Japan and the rest of Asia. Explore the ancient shrines and islands of Munakata to discover how ritual worship and ascetic practices evolved against the backdrop of Japanese history and early trade.

Three shrines for three sister deities

Munakata Taisha consists of three main shrines: Hetsu-miya on the mainland and two island shrines, Nakatsu-miya on Oshima, and Okitsu-miya on Okinoshima. Worship centers on Three Female Deities, daughters of the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami, the most revered deity in Japan. In ancient times, before embarking on a voyage to China or the Korean Peninsula, travelers would pray to the deities enshrined here and give thanks on their safe return.

The most accessible shrine is Hetsu-miya on the coast, about one hour by public transportation from Fukuoka City. The main sanctuary (*honden*), built in 1578, enshrines Ichikishimahime no Kami, one of the daughters of Amaterasu. On a hill behind the main shrine, the ritual site Takamiya Saijo marks the place the three deities are said to have descended to earth. Two smaller subsidiary shrines behind the main sanctuary venerate the other two deities, who are enshrined on the islands of Oshima and Okinoshima. This makes it possible to visit all three deities, without leaving the mainland.

Island Shrines

The island of Oshima is the home of Nakatsu-miya, which enshrines Tagitsuhihime no Kami, another daughter of Amaterasu. Local sailors and fishermen pray here for safety at sea and good catches.

Okitsu-miya shrine, which is located on Okinoshima, is dedicated to Tagorihime no Kami, a third daughter of the sun goddess. Since the whole island is considered sacred, it is closed to the public. Only Shinto priests from Munakata Taisha are permitted to visit. Before setting foot on the island, they must purify themselves by bathing in the sea, in a ritual known as *misogi*.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site

Ritual objects dating back to the fourth century have been found on Okinoshima, before Japan's earliest written chronicle, the *Kojiki* (712). Thanks to strict taboos that forbid visitors to the island, the heritage of Okinoshima has been exceptionally well preserved, providing a valuable record of the rituals performed there and earning the island a UNESCO World Heritage designation. Many of the 80,000 ritual objects and treasures found on Okinoshima are on display at the Shimpokan Museum, located on the grounds of the Hetsu-miya shrine.

The three shrines devoted to the deities, and the tombs of the Munakata family that once ruled the region, were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2017 as the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region.