

The History of Asakusa

The iconic Asakusa district, located in Taito Ward in the northeastern part of central Tokyo, is much more than the site of internationally renowned temples and shrines. The district developed over many centuries, through a combination of happenstance, the people who called it home and local geography.

The origins of Asakusa date back some 1,400 years to the Asuka period (552–645), before the city of Edo (now called Tokyo) even existed. According to legend, in the year 628, two brothers, Hinokuma no Hamanari and Hinokuma no Takenari, were fishing along the Sumida River when they found a golden statue caught in their nets. Upon returning to town, they showed the statue to the village wise man, Haji no Nakamoto, who recognized it as a depiction of the bodhisattva Kannon, the Buddhist deity of compassion. Haji was so impressed by the statue's divinity that he converted his home into a temple to enshrine the image. This event is thought to be the humble beginning of Sensoji Temple. The large temple complex visitors see today was constructed in 942 by Taira no Kinmasa, who governed the area during the Heian period (794–1185).

While the discovery of the statue of Kannon and the establishment of Sensoji Temple helped turn Asakusa into a place of religious significance, it was during the Edo period (1603–1867) that the area began to truly flourish. During this era of peace and economic and cultural prosperity after the first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), designated Edo the nation's capital, the population of the city grew rapidly. The temple enjoyed a constant stream of visitors, especially after it was granted the shogun's patronage.

Local residents who performed tasks such as cleaning at Sensoji were granted special dispensation to open shops on the approach to the temple and peddle their wares to visitors. The shops sold toys and souvenirs from nearby wholesalers, as well as sweets and other snacks. This was how the Nakamise shopping street began.

The Yoshiwara pleasure quarter, Edo's designated red-light district, was relocated to Asakusa after the original location burned down during the Great Meireki Fire of 1657. Edo's kabuki district, Saruwaka Sanza, was also relocated there, and Asakusa came to flourish as a center of entertainment. Both the red-light district and kabuki theaters in the area behind the temple (known as Sensoji-ura or Asakusa Okuyama) attracted many visitors in addition to the steady stream of pilgrims visiting Sensoji.

The area maintained its reputation as an entertainment hub well into the twentieth century, thanks to the *rokku* (sixth district), which housed various performance venues and was the location of Japan's first movie theater.

Despite being ravaged by fires throughout the centuries and razed by firebombing in World War II, Asakusa has always bounced back, thanks to its enduring reputation and the unflagging spirit of its residents, who take enormous pride in their neighborhood. These days, Sensoji welcomes an estimated 30 million visitors annually, and the district hosts many major celebrations. Asakusa Jinja Shrine's Sanja Festival is considered one of Tokyo's "Three Great Festivals," and the annual Tori-no-Ichi fair in Oku Asakusa is one of the largest events of its type. The area of Asakusa along the west bank of the Sumida River is a top spot for cherry blossom viewing in spring as well as for enjoying one of Tokyo's largest fireworks displays in summer.

Today, the district is divided into three areas: Asakusa, the central area; Asakusa Minami to the south of the temple; and Oku Asakusa to the north. While each area has its own character, visitors can be certain that the traces of history will be in evidence no matter where they venture in Asakusa.