

## **Kaminarimon Gate**

The enormous red lantern at the center of the Kaminarimon (thunder gate) is a vivid symbol of Asakusa, and is almost as famous as Sensoji Temple itself. However, the gate has changed considerably throughout the years.

The Sensoji Temple complex dates back to the Heian period (794–1185). When the temple was constructed by governor Taira no Kinmasa in 942, its main gate did not feature a lantern of any sort. That gate, known as Furaijinmon, was named after Fujin and Raijin, the deities of wind and thunder. These guardian figures were housed in structures flanking the gate when it was relocated to its current location on the south side of the temple in 1635; however, the gate was destroyed by a fire just four years later.

The gate was reconstructed in 1649 by the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651); this iteration was the first to be called the Kaminarimon, but it, too, was destroyed. In all, the gate burned down four times. After a fire in 1866, nearly a hundred years passed before the permanent Kaminarimon was built. In the interim, temporary gates were constructed using different styles and materials. Among the most notable versions were the gate created to commemorate the establishment of Tokyo as Japan's capital (1868), the arch-shaped gate built to commemorate Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1905), and the gate built to celebrate the enthronement of Emperor Showa (1928).

The current Kaminarimon was built in 1960 with donations from Matsushita Konosuke (1894–1989), the founder of the electrical appliance company that is now Panasonic. The iconic red lantern in the center is 3.9 meters high and 3.3 meters wide, and weighs approximately 700 kilograms. The kanji characters for “Kaminarimon” are written on the front of the lantern, with the characters for “Furaijinmon” on the back. The intricate dragon carving on its base is also noteworthy. The lantern is flanked by statues of Fujin and Raijin facing outward, as well as the dragon-tailed Buddhist deities Tenryu and Kinryu facing inward. During events like the Sanja Festival, the lantern is collapsed so that participants carrying *mikoshi* portable shrines can pass through more easily. It is illuminated at night after the temple closes.