

Nakamise Shopping Street

Filling the 250 meters between the Kaminarimon gate and Sensoji Temple are rows of stalls where vendors sell toys, souvenirs, snacks, and other specialty items. This is the famed Nakamise shopping street.

The area around Sensoji has thrived since the temple was established in 628. But it was not until the Edo period (1603–1867) that it really began to flourish. This was partially thanks to the first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), who patronized the temple in the belief it would protect him from misfortune.

Vendors in the portion of the Nakamise that stretches between Kaminarimon and the Hozomon (or Niomon) gate primarily sold toys and souvenirs. As more and more people began visiting Asakusa—whether to pay their respects at Sensoji, or to visit the Yoshiwara red-light district, the Asakusa Sanza theater, or the other entertainments of the Okuyama area behind the temple as it developed into a thriving pleasure quarter—the merchants of the Nakamise grew in number.

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), the Tokyo Metropolitan Government gained control of Sensoji, and ordered the merchants of the Nakamise to stop selling their wares. The market was replaced with the Western-style red brick shops that were in fashion at the time, but these were destroyed by the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923; reconstruction of the area began two years later. Two decades later, the fire bombings at the end of World War II demolished the market once again. Asakusa's merchants persisted, building the present-day Nakamise, which is a mix of modern and traditional shops with a retro aesthetic. The 88 shops sell everything from souvenirs and traditional goods to sweets, snacks, and antiques, and have painted shutters depicting the various events that take place in Asakusa throughout the year. No visit to Asakusa is complete without a stroll through this bustling shopping area.