

## Shukunegi

Located on the southern end of Sado Island, Shukunegi is a historic town that once served as a bustling port and home to many shipwrights. The houses of wealthy shipbuilders and freight vessel masters still stand in Shukunegi today, along with the dwelling of Shibata Shuzo (1820–1859), a cartographer responsible for putting Sado Island on the world map. The preserved town consists of 200 houses, about 20 of which are inhabited. Visitors can walk through the narrow alleyways and observe the traditional architecture, such as roofs composed of wooden blocks held down by nailed stones, and thick stone bridges.

The geology of Shukunegi is just as fascinating as its townscape. The ground at Shukunegi and nearby Kotoura, also along the coast, is the result of an underwater volcanic eruption. Over time, ocean waves created caves in the volcanic rock, and there are 11 such natural caves there now. In addition, the Somazaki Tunnel is a humanmade cave next to Shukunegi that was used for salt production and the occasional storing of *taraibune* tub boats. Farther inland is the Iwayasan Cave, in which images of the Buddha have been carved into the rock.

Shukunegi was a node on the *kitamaebune* shipping route along the coast of the Sea of Japan, connecting the northern part of Honshu, Japan's main island, with the mercantile city of Osaka on the Inland Sea. The *kitamaebune* trade was officially established in 1672 and later extended to Hokkaido, and brought great wealth to Shukunegi. As much as one-third of all commerce on Sado during the Edo period (1603–1868) took place in the town. The wooden ships that plied this route could hold up to 150 tons of merchandise. Sado merchants traveled to Osaka, traded their goods along the way, and set course back home; one round trip could take an entire year. The wooden ships used in this trade were very light and on the return journey, the empty ships were prone to flipping over in strong winds, so stones were placed in them as ballast. Six of these stones now stand along the coastline near Shukunegi as a reminder of bygone days.