

Terashita no Machinami (The Street Below the Temple)

It all started here

Tsumago was the first town in Japan to commit to preserving its historic appearance. Restoration and conservation efforts got under way in 1968, driven by special funding to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Japan's return to imperial rule. Three years were spent restoring the stretch of 26 houses immediately below Kotokuji Temple at the southern end of town. An area of just under 1,250 hectares was designated an official preservation zone in 1976, covering not just the town, but the surrounding mountains.

What makes Tsumago an unusual case is the organic, grassroots way in which town residents, local government, and historians work together for its preservation. Efforts are made not only to preserve the buildings and the landscape, but also to keep the history and even the spirit of the town alive. Old buildings have been repaired, incongruous shop signs removed, and postwar buildings replaced with sympathetic replicas. While Edo-period buildings predominate, you can also see buildings from the Meiji (1868–1912), Taisho (1912–1926), and early Showa (1926–1989) eras.

Tsumago is rich in typical post town architecture. Look in particular for the *takabei* high plaster walls and for the projecting gable parapets called *udatsu*. These features prevented the spread of fires while also demonstrating the wealth of the occupants. Notice also the protruding beams called *dashibari-zukuri* that support an overhanging second floor to maximize living space while maintaining road width.