

Nakasendo

Road through the Mountains

The Nakasendo was one of the Gokaido—the five highways that formed the network of centrally administered roads linking the city of Edo to the provinces during the Edo period (1603–1868).

Of these highways, the most important were the Nakasendo and the Tokaido, which connected Edo, the eastern capital, with Kyoto, the western capital. Because it was relatively flat and ran along the coast for much of its length, the Tokaido saw much more foot traffic than the Nakasendo, which passed through more varied terrain. Nakasendo means “road through the mountains,” a description particularly applicable to the 80-kilometer-long stretch running through the Kiso valley. The celebrated opening line of *Before the Dawn*, Shimazaki Toson’s historical novel about the social upheaval that the Meiji Restoration brought to the area, testifies: “The Kiso Road lies entirely in the mountains.”

The Nakasendo was not static. The route of the road would regularly migrate up or down the mountains in response to floods, landslides, and the destruction of bridges. The road was roughly 530 kilometers in length and an average of 2.7 meters wide, though it often widened at turns to prevent the poles of palanquins from bumping up against trees. The roadbed was made of sand and earth, and the local people, who provided labor in lieu of taxes, were responsible for removing stones and rocks from the thoroughfare. Since the Nakasendo was never used as a road for horse carts, very little of it was paved.