

Nachi Falls

Nachi Falls is Japan's longest single drop waterfall, plunging 133 meters. The falls have been a place of worship since the fourth century when, legend has it, Emperor Jimmu (711–585 BCE), the first emperor of Japan, saw something shining in the mountains when his boat, traveling from Kyushu, landed on the Kumano coast.

Shugendo, a folk religion based in mountain worship that involves ascetic practices, has been practiced here since the Heian period (794–1185). Kumano Nachi Taisha, one of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage's most important shrines, has its origins in worship of Nachi Falls. The shrine was initially built near the base of the falls but was moved halfway up Mt. Nachi to its current location in 317 CE, and was rebuilt in the 1800s. Sutra relics from the twelfth century, discovered near the falls, are on display in the shrine's Treasure Hall (Ryuhoden).

Hiro Jinja Shrine is a small shrine associated with Kumano Nachi Taisha located at the base of the waterfall. Drinking the water pumped up to the shrine from the waterfall's plunge basin is said to extend longevity. On the first day of every month, an offering of flowers is made to the falls. Once a year, during July's Nachi no Ogi Matsuri, there is a fire festival at Kumano Nachi Taisha. Flaming torches and portable shrines are carried from the main hall down to the waterfall, purifying the route. Twelve portable shrines are used to transport the 12 deities of Kumano Nachi Taisha to the base of the falls, where they were initially enshrined.

The hard bedrock of the waterfall was formed 14 million years ago when a magma chamber cooled and hardened. The surrounding weak rock layers eventually eroded, leaving a ledge over which flows more than a ton of water per second. Kumano Nachi Taisha is located beside Nachi-san Seigantoji, a Buddhist temple with a striking three-story pagoda. Thus, the falls unite Buddhist, Shinto, and Shugendo worship.