

The Pearls of Toba

Pearls develop when a grain of sand or other irritant enters an oyster's shell, and the oyster secretes a protective substance to envelop the offending particle. In the past, Toba's famed *ama* female divers would occasionally happen upon pearls in the course of harvesting seafood. In 1893, area-native Mikimoto Kokichi (1858–1954) launched the world's first successful pearl-farming business here in Toba. The sheltered inlets of the rugged coastlines provide an ideal habitat for pearl oysters, which today are farmed in cages suspended from rafts. The distinctive sight of rafts arranged in careful patterns on Toba Bay and other nearby waters is unique to the Ise-Shima region. Mikimoto Pearl Island, located just off the Toba waterfront, offers detailed explanations of the history and process of pearl farming, plus an opportunity to see actual *ama* divers at work in traditional dress.