

Unzen Onsen Town Religious History Trail: Christians in Unzen

Unzen is deeply connected to the spiritual traditions of both Shinto and Buddhism, but it is also inextricably tied to the history of Christianity in Japan. Here, thousands of locals—peasants, samurai, and even lords—converted to Christianity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Christianity arrived in Japan in 1549 with Portuguese traders seeking new markets in a land they knew little about. In the decades that followed, the religion and snippets of the culture of the Iberian Peninsula quickly spread throughout the island of Kyushu and beyond. By the 1590s, Nagasaki was a stronghold of the *kirishitan* (as they were called by the Japanese), and contained several churches and a Christian printing press.

In Unzen, the Christian lord Arima Harunobu (1567–1612) ordered the destruction of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples as a rejection of centuries of religious tradition. Many Buddhist statues were beheaded by the newly converted Christians, and these headless statues can still be seen throughout the peninsula.

In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), one of the great unifiers of Japan, suspected that the Portuguese were intending to colonize Japan after converting its people to Christianity. He ordered the first expulsion of missionaries. In 1597, 26 Christians were crucified in Nagasaki. They were the first of thousands to be killed in the religious upheaval that followed, culminating in the disastrous Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638).