

Unzen Onsen Town Religious History Trail: The Shimabara Rebellion

On a hill overlooking the *jigoku* hot springs of Unzen stands a simple cross: the Monument to Christian Martyrs. The first cross was erected during the Meiji era (1868–1912), commemorating the 33 Christians tortured and killed in Unzen during the first half of the seventeenth century.

Christianity first came to Japan in the latter half of the 1500s via Portuguese missionaries, and it became especially popular on the island of Kyushu, where the missionaries first arrived. But by the 1630s, the religion was banned, foreign missionaries were exiled, and many Japanese Christians had been executed. A particularly gruesome form of torture carried out here in Unzen was just one of many examples of the brutal repression. Christians who refused to renounce their faith had water from the hot springs poured on their bodies, causing burns and lesions. Sometimes a Christian would be thrown into the springs to die.

In December of 1637, Christians rebelled against high taxation and the violent repression of their faith, striking out against the shogunal government in a revolt known as the Shimabara Rebellion. By April 1638, the rebels had lost, and tens of thousands of Christians had been executed. The few remaining Christians practiced their faith in secret for almost 250 years.