

Chijiwa Fault

The Shimabara Peninsula is a geologically active region, but its volcanoes are only half the story. Here, on a cliff created by the 14-kilometer-long Chijiwa Fault, you can get a better understanding of the peninsula's geologic past, present, and future.

The entire peninsula is slowly moving south. At the same time, the faults that cross it from east to west are pulling it apart. Pulling faults, called "normal" faults, are different from the "reverse" pushing faults that are far more common across Japan. The land to the south of here is moving just 1 cm faster than the land to the north, which causes the center of the peninsula to sink by about 1.5 mm per year even as volcanic activity continues to create new volcanoes. At its highest point to the east, the cliff created by the fault is more than 450 meters tall.

As the center of the peninsula sank, water rushed in and filled its western side, creating part of Tachibana Bay. Meanwhile, lava from beneath the bay rose to the surface in the space left behind, creating the Unzen Mountains in the distance. The town of Chijiwa, which stands directly ahead, is built on material that has washed down those mountains over thousands of years.

If not for the sinking caused by the movement along the faults, it is likely that the mountains at the center of the Shimabara Peninsula would be taller than Mt. Fuji (3,776 m). As shown by the eruption of Mt. Heisei Shinzan (1,486 m) in the 1990s, however, the region continues to be shaped and changed by volcanic activity.