

Nikkō Facts: Religion and Geography

How Nikkō Got Its Name

Shōdō Shōnin (735–817) came to Nikkō to practice religious austerities on Mt. Nantai. At the time it was called “Futarasan” (Mt. Futara), the Japanese pronunciation of Mt. Potalaka, the mythical home of Kannon (Bodhisattva of Compassion) on an island south of India.

The Chinese characters for *futara* can also be pronounced as *nikō*, and the famous monk Kūkai (774–835) is credited with suggesting this change. Over time, *nikō* became *nikkō*, which could be written with the characters for “sunlight.” The new characters are thought to be a reference to Dainichi Nyorai (Cosmic Buddha, or Buddha of the Sun), who is the most esteemed deity in Tendai Buddhism. The region came to be known as “Nikkō,” and the mountain was eventually renamed Mt. Nantai.

Sacred Mountains

The mountains of Nikkō are thought to be incarnations of both Buddhist and Shinto deities.

Mt. Tarō (2,368 m)

Buddhist: Batō Kannon

Shinto: Ajisukitakahikone no Mikoto

Mt. Nyohō (2,464 m)

Buddhist: Amida Nyorai

Shinto: Tagorihime no Mikoto

Mt. Nantai (2,484 m)

Buddhist: Senju Kannon

Shinto: Ōnamuchi no Mikoto

Waterfalls

There are more than 250 waterfalls in the Nikkō area, and many are used for *misogi*, the ascetic practice of standing under a waterfall.

Lakes

The Nikkō area, including Oku-Nikkō, has 48 lakes, although there are many smaller bodies of water as well. The number 48 is an auspicious number in Buddhism: it represents the 48 vows made by Hōzō Bosatsu before he attained Buddhahood and became known as Amida Nyorai.