

Nachi Waterfall and Hiro-jinja Shrine

Nachi Waterfall is the tallest single-drop waterfall in Japan. Its waters plunge in a stream that is 13 meters wide at the top to a basin 133 meters below. The thundering roar, spray, and sheer scale of the cascade inspired such awe and reverence that it became a place of worship, and was eventually formalized as a Shinto shrine. Unlike most other shrines, Hiro-jinja has no worship hall. Instead, devotees say their prayers facing the waterfall, which is the shrine's *shintai*, the entity in which the deity resides.

A short flight of stairs up from the main shrine grounds is the Otaki Haisho (Place of Prayer at the Waterfall), which offers a slightly elevated view of the falls.

Worship and Tradition

The deity worshiped here year-round is Hiro Gongen, identified with Onamuchi-no-Mikoto, the kami of connections and marital harmony. As Hiro-jinja is a branch shrine of Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine, the deities worshiped there are carried here each July 14 for a one-day “homecoming” as part of the grand shrine’s Fire Festival.

There are no less than 48 waterfalls in Kumano, but Nachi Waterfall is the most important to the Kumano faith. For this reason, it is known as the “First Waterfall” (Ichi-no-Taki). In ancient times, *yamabushi* (Shugendo mountain ascetics) used it as a site for ritual austerities. From the Heian period (794–1185), nobles and even former emperors sometimes came here to perform the same practices. The 500-year-old painting called the Nachisan Shrine Mandala kept in the Treasure Hall at Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine, depicts the priest Mongaku under a waterfall performing his 21 days of austerities. The basin of Nachi Waterfall is no longer made available for these purposes, but *yamabushi* continue to perform other rituals at the site.

Imperial Connections

According to tradition, Nachi Waterfall was discovered by Jimmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan. He saw a “glimmering in the mountains” upon arriving at the Kumano coast, and followed it inland to reach the falls. This was the beginning of his journey to found the nation’s first capital in present-day Nara.

Later, pilgrimages to Kumano became popular among the Heian nobility. Many retired emperors visited the site, including the former emperor Kazan (968–1008), who came to Kumano in 991, after his abdication. It is said that he performed a thousand days of austerity under Nachi Waterfall and placed a nine-holed abalone shell in the basin, imparting mystical, life-sustaining powers to the water. Modern visitors are still invited to drink water from the basin, which is said to increase longevity.

Nachi Waterfall's beauty made it sacred, and that sacredness is why its beauty was protected and can still be enjoyed today.