

Karatsu Kaido Akamajuku

Akamajuku is a post town on the Karatsu Kaido highway, one of the major transport routes through Kyushu in the Edo period (1603–1867). Before railway infrastructure developed in Fukuoka in the Meiji era (1868–1912), the Karatsu Kaido was the main route between Karatsu in Saga Prefecture and Kitakyushu in Fukuoka Prefecture. Akamajuku was one of 21 post towns along the route, where travelers could water their horses, eat a meal, and find lodgings for the night. It was the main retail area in Munakata until the Meiji era, when a new rail line connecting Fukuoka with Kitakyushu bypassed the town.

Today, a 500-meter stretch of the Karatsu Kaido in Akamajuku retains its old-fashioned atmosphere, with shops and townhouses built in the nineteenth century.

A handful of businesses from the Edo period remain in operation, including the Katsuya Sake Brewery, which supplies sake for Shinto rituals at Munakata Taisha. The brewery has a wide street frontage, with a Meiji-era extension on the original Edo-period building. The water for making sake is drawn from one of the two remaining wells in the area. The other well is at Akamakan, the tourist information center.

According to local legend, the area got its name from a red horse. As the story goes, Emperor Jimmu—believed to be Japan’s first emperor—was traveling through the area with his forces on the way to Yamato (present-day Nara) when a deity appeared, riding a red horse, and guided them safely through the area. The name Akama can be read as “red horse.” It is said that Hasshogu Shrine in Munakata was built at the request of Emperor Tenmu (631–686), Japan’s fortieth emperor, to enshrine the deity that protected Emperor Jimmu on his journey.