

Ise Jingu's Sacred Forest

Ise Jingu is Japan's foremost *jinja* (Shinto shrine). It is dedicated to Amaterasu Omikami, the goddess of the sun, and has a history that stretches back over 2,000 years. There are about 125 shrines on the grounds of Ise Jingu, the most important being the Naiku (Kotaijingu) and the Geku (Toyouke-daijingu). The Naiku is surrounded by a sacred, verdant forest called Kyuikirin.

The Kyuikirin makes up about one-fourth of the area of the city of Ise, covering some 5,500 hectares and supporting over 850 species of flora. It helps support the region's biodiversity, and helps prevent flooding and maintain the purity of the groundwater and nearby rivers. It also plays an important role in one of Ise Jingu's most important traditions, the Shikinen Sengu.

The Shikinen Sengu is a ritual in which the Naiku, Geku, and other shrines are completely rebuilt on adjacent plots every 20 years, and symbols of their respective kami, or deities, are moved to the new buildings. The shrines are constructed using new Japanese cypress wood, much of which was historically harvested from the Kyuikirin.

Ise Jingu began a 200-year cypress-planting project in 1923 to ensure the resources for this sacred ritual could be sustained for future generations. This ambitious forest management project aims to eventually create a self-sustainable source of the wood required for the Shikinen Sengu. Trees are planted annually, and their growth is monitored constantly. The undergrowth around the cypress saplings is cut back, and unnecessary trees are thinned out to provide conditions in which the strongest can flourish.

The project has been a success so far: about 25 percent of the lumber used in the ritual in 2013 came from trees harvested in the Kyuikirin forest. The timeline of this project is so long that no one person can see it to completion; it will require the cooperation and commitment of future generations.