

## Shiogama Jinja Shrine and Shiwahiko Jinja Shrine

Shiogama Jinja Shrine is thought to have been founded before the Nara period (710–794), although the exact year is unknown. Shiwahiko Jinja Shrine was moved to its present location more recently in 1874. Today, these two Shinto shrines share the same grounds and some festivals.

Shiogama Jinja venerates three deities. Shiotsuchi Oji no Kami, who protects the ocean and taught people the secret of salt-making, is enshrined in the detached sanctuary (*betsugu*). The warrior deities Takemikazuchi no Kami and Futsunushi no Kami are respectively enshrined in the left and right sanctuaries (*sagu* and *ugu*). The main shrine buildings, from 1704, are constructed in the *nagare-zukuri* style, which has an asymmetrical sloping roof, longer at the front than at the back.

Shiwahiko Jinja is dedicated to Shiwahiko no Kami, the god of agriculture, who is also the guardian deity of the Shiogama area. The lavish black- and vermillion-lacquered main shrine building was rebuilt in 1938.

Visitors approach the shrines by climbing a 202-step stone stairway, lined with stone lanterns and flanked by a thick grove of cryptomeria (*sugi*) trees. The stairs end at the stately Zuishinmon Gate (erected in the 1700s), which leads into the main complex.

The shrine grounds cover around 30,000 square meters of a hill overlooking the city of Shiogama and the islands of Matsushima Bay. In addition to 14 shrine buildings designated Important Cultural Properties, the grounds include serene Japanese-style gardens and around 300 cherry trees of 40 different varieties, including many *Shiogama zakura*, which are designated Natural Monuments of Japan. The fluffy blooms of these double-flowered cherry trees appear in late April to early May.

The shrines celebrate several festivals throughout the year. In the spring, the cherry blossoms are illuminated after dark, and during the Hote Matsuri festival, 16 men carry a 1-ton *mikoshi* portable shrine down the 202 steep stone steps. For the summertime Minato Matsuri (Port Festival), *mikoshi* for both shrines are loaded onto elaborate dragon- and phoenix-shaped boats and then floated around Matsushima Bay. During the Hatsuohiki Harvest Festival, held on November 23, the plaza in front of Shiogama Jinja is filled with barrels of rice, huge fish, and vegetables, in gratitude for a bountiful

catch and harvest. In early February, the shrines host a massive Setsubun Festival, with the bean-throwing custom (*mamemaki*), said to drive away evil, that marks the arrival of spring.