Ichōzan Shrine

The history of Ichōzan Shrine dates to 658 CE. This small shrine, nestled at the foot of Mt. Nanakura (287 m), was established to pray for the victory of celebrated general Abe no Hirafu (575–664) in his battles against the indigenous *Emishi* people of northern Honshū and Hokkaido.

Although the shrine has a history of more than 1,350 years, it is now most famous for the ginkgo trees that have grown on its grounds for more than three centuries. Called *ichō*, these trees are the source of the shrine's name, which means "Ginkgo Mountain." Ginkgo trees are planted around many shrines and temples in Japan because their leaves and limbs have an unusually high moisture content, making them difficult to burn. Consequently, they act as natural barriers to fire.

The 28-meter-tall "Breast-Pillar Ginkgo" (*chichi-bashira no ichō*) closest to the shrine is made up of several trees growing tightly together. According to local folklore, praying before the tree can help women who struggle to produce breast milk. The legend originated during the Edo period (1603–1867) when the wife of a daimyo of the Satake family wrote her plea and placed it on a branch of the tree. After her prayer was answered, the shrine was given permission to use the Satake family crest.

Farther along the path to the left of the shrine is the "Intertwining-Branch Ginkgo" (*renri no ichō*), which is actually two trees of similar height. The term *renri* can also mean "intimate male–female relations," and the trees are considered to be husband and wife, a symbol of marital harmony. People seeking a romantic partner are advised to hold their breath and circle the trees three times, passing through the arch between the trunks in a figure-eight pattern. Those who do so may see their wish fulfilled.