

Hotokusan Inari Taisha

This commanding shrine is visible from a distance as visitors approach its hillside location outside the city center in Nagaoka. The black gabled roofs and vermillion-and-white features tower above the forest. The shrine's distinctive architecture forms striking color contrasts with the surrounding greenery in summer and the snow-covered hillside in winter.

Hotokusan Inari Taisha is laid out across two complexes. The lower complex is the larger of the two and is situated about halfway up the hillside. Its two main buildings are much bigger than the ones found in most shrines of this type in Japan.

The second, slightly smaller complex is at the top of the hill. This is only used twice a year for the hosting of local festivals. One of these, the Yomatsuri, or "night festival" uses between fifty and sixty thousand red candles in its main prayer ritual.

There is a lot to see and do here outside the festival season, too. From late June to early July, the main shrine building has its own special entrance ritual that visitors can try enacting. This involves passing through a large, ring-shaped gate made of tightly woven rope at the building's entrance.

To enter the main shrine correctly (and maximize your good fortune, according to legend), you need to walk into the gate, then out and back in again in a "figure 8" motion. There is a visual guide next to the entrance that demonstrates how to do this. Remember to take off your shoes before entering the building.

Of course, many people who come to shrines do so to pray, and this one offers a singular way to do just that. In the main shrine building, you will notice two altars, each adorned with colored candles. These candles are the basis for the shrine's unique prayer ritual.

To complete the ritual, you must light two sets of five colored candles and place them on the altar, from left to right, in the following order: green, red, yellow, white, and purple.

Each candle is said to have a different positive effect on your life.

Green candles are associated with health, academic success, and general well-being.

Red candles bring good fortune with money and success in business.

Yellow candles help guard against earthquakes, typhoons, and other natural disasters.

White candles ensure a healthy and happy home life.

Purple candles are the last to be lit, but in matters of faith they are perhaps the most important, as they help to keep your spirit healthy and balanced.

Hotokusan Inari Taisha is located 25 minutes from Nagaoka Station by car. If traveling by train, take the Shinetsu Line for 16 minutes and get off at Echigo-Iwatsuka Station. The shrine is a 10-minute walk from there.

Entry to the shrine is free. However, you are welcome to make a financial contribution to its upkeep and maintenance by purchasing one of the many unique lucky charms on sale at the shrine.