

Ishiyamadera Temple

Ishiyamadera Temple is at the foot of Mt. Garan on the west side of the Seta River in Otsu. The ancient grounds occupy a series of levels leading up the mountainside that gradually reveal the buildings in the precincts of this Shingon Buddhist sanctuary.

Ishiyamadera is said to have been established in 747 by the priest Roben (689–773), who also founded Todaiji Temple in Nara. Todaiji is famous for its giant bronze Buddha statue. According to legend, the big bronze Buddha was to have been decorated with gold, but there was not enough to complete the statue as Japan did not produce any gold at that time. Roben placed his personal Buddhist image on the rocks where Ishiyamadera now stands and prayed for a solution. His prayers were answered, but he found he could no longer remove his Buddhist image from the rock, so Ishiyamadera was built around it.

The mountain itself is partly composed of dark wollastonite, and large outcrops of the stone form a craggy semi-circle in front of the main hall (*hondo*). The best view of the sacred rocks is from above, from the staircase leading to the two-story pagoda (*tahoto*). Maple and cedar trees arch over the pathways, creating an almost jungle-like atmosphere that is particularly striking in autumn when the leaves change color. The main hall opens up to a view of natural greenery, functioning almost like an observation deck for the woodland surroundings.

The wooden *tahoto* pagoda is the oldest of its kind in Japan. The structure was built in 1194 by Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), the first shogun of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). The distinctive sweep of the pagoda's two roofs gives the large building an elegant lightness. It is designated a National Treasure, and the sculptures and paintings inside are designated Important Cultural Properties.

Ishiyamadera is known as the place where noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu began writing *The Tale of Genji*, the world's first novel, in the eleventh century. She is said to have been inspired by the view of the full moon over Lake Biwa from the temple's highest point. The vista from that vantage point is immortalized as one of the Eight Views of Omi, a traditional selection of scenic views of Omi Province (present-day Shiga Prefecture) that are themes of poetry and art. This vista is associated with the full moon and the temple still hosts moon viewings today.

The giant straw sandal on the left side of the 800-year-old Higashi Daimon (East Great Gate) indicates the temple's popularity with pilgrims. It is one of the 33 temples on the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage in the Kansai area of western Japan. The gate is covered with paper signs left by pilgrims over the years as proof of their visit. This practice has been discontinued in order to protect the historic buildings.