

Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine

Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine claims a 2,000-year history. It is mentioned in the *Kojiki*, the eighth-century chronicle of myths and legends that is considered to be the first written record of Japanese history. Hiyoshi Taisha stands at the foot of Mt. Hiei and enshrines Sanno, the Shinto deity of the mountain. It is the head shrine of the more than 3,800 Hiyoshi, Hie, and Sanno shrines across Japan. Over time, other deities have been included and the vast grounds once featured shrines to 108 different deities. Hiyoshi Taisha is also the guardian shrine of the nearby Enryakuji Temple complex.

The grounds of Hiyoshi Taisha are lush and secluded. The Omiya River flows through the precincts in streams and small waterfalls, drowning out the sounds of the outside world. In autumn, the area is blanketed with vibrant red leaves that fall from the more than 3,000 maple trees on the grounds.

At the entrance is the Omiya Bridge, thought to be the oldest stone bridge in Japan. It is designated an Important Cultural Property, along with the two smaller bridges beside it. The original wooden bridge was destroyed when the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) burned down both Hiyoshi Taisha and Enryakuji in 1571 in a bid to crush politically influential institutions that had resisted his rule. The bridge was rebuilt in stone in the late 1600s.

The shrine is also famous for its distinctive Sanno Torii gate that has a triangular shape on top to represent Mt. Hiei. The mountain is home to many wild monkeys, which are considered messengers of the deity. The monkeys are believed to have the power to ward off evil, and monkey motifs are visible on many buildings.

There are two major shrine compounds on the grounds: the Nishihongu (western main shrine) and the Higashihongu (eastern main shrine). The main halls (*honden*) of both are designated National Treasures. Their traditional hinoki cypress bark roofs must be replaced every 50 years. In the corridor of each *honden* are a pair of *komainu* guardian statues dating back over 400 years. Beside the main hall in the Nishihongu is a storage room for one of the seven *mikoshi* (portable shrines) used during Hiyoshi Taisha's annual Sannosai Festival.