

## Enryakuji Temple

Enryakuji Temple is one of the most historically important Buddhist sites in Japan. It is located on Mt. Hiei, which has been worshiped as a sacred mountain since ancient times. The sprawling temple grounds cover roughly 1,700 hectares of forest, and the temple is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site that includes several locations in Kyoto, Otsu, and Uji.

Enryakuji was founded in 788 by the Buddhist priest Saicho (767–822) and is the head temple of the Tendai school. The founders of several other schools of Buddhism trained at Enryakuji as well, and it is known as the “mother mountain” of Japanese Buddhism. Throughout its long history the temple has embraced a range of different practices, including hosting Buddhist monks from China and Korea.

During its peak, the Enryakuji temple complex had some 3,000 buildings. However, in 1571 the entire compound was burned down in a siege by the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582). Nobunaga sought to unify all of Japan under his rule, and he destroyed many politically powerful temples that opposed him. Enryakuji was gradually rebuilt, and today consists of 150 halls and other buildings. The grounds are divided into three main precincts: Todo, Saito, and Yokawa, each with a main hall.

The Todo precinct is the core of Enryakuji and includes the treasure hall and the Konponchudo, the temple’s main hall. It houses statues of Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of medicine and healing, including one figure reputedly carved by Saicho himself. The vast hall also houses the temple’s eternally burning flame, which was lit in 788 and has never been extinguished. The Konponchudo is refurbished roughly every 60 years, always using the same zelkova and cypress wood and traditional copper roof tiles, and is designated a National Treasure.

The Saito precinct, roughly 1 kilometer north of Todo, is quiet and filled with cherry trees and camellias. Due to Mt. Hiei’s elevation, the cherry blossoms there bloom up to one month later than in the rest of the Otsu area. Amid such verdant surroundings the bright vermilion of the Jogyodo and Hokkodo halls stands out. The two identically shaped halls are joined by a small, covered walkway and are collectively called the Ninaido. Monks use each hall for a different kind of training.

The Yokawa precinct is on the northernmost part of Mt. Hiei and can be accessed by shuttle bus from the Todo precinct. Down a long pathway through maple trees that turn fiery red in autumn is the Ganzan Daishido. This hall is dedicated to Ryogen (912–985), a former abbot of Enryakuji known posthumously as Ganzan Daishi. He devoted himself to the revitalization of Enryakuji and is said to be the originator of *omikuji*, the fortune slips now popular at many shrines and temples in Japan.