

## Otsu as a Post Town on the Tokaido

Otsu has long been considered a gateway to Kyoto because of the close proximity of the two cities. This status as a gate became more formal during the Edo period (1603–1867) when Otsu was established as the last post town on the Tokaido highway connecting Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and Kyoto.

The Tokaido was one of the *gokaido*, five official routes connecting Edo to other parts of Japan. With the shogun in Edo and the emperor in Kyoto, easy movement between the two cities was crucial. The Tokugawa shogunate developed the five roads and established post towns (*shukuba*) along them to ensure government officials and travelers had places to rest during their journeys. Otsu was designated the 53rd and final post town on the Tokaido (a coastal route) and was also at the end of the longer, inland Nakasendo road.

Otsu became a hub for samurai and aristocrats as well as pilgrims, merchants, and artists. The downtown area, with its traditional wooden townhouses (*machiya*), was filled with inns, teahouses, and shops. Apart from hospitality, Otsu was famous for its fabrics, and many travelers looked to upgrade their clothing before entering Kyoto. A diverse range of businesses stretched out from Otsu along the Tokaido, and the area became known as Otsu Hyakucho, or the Hundred Towns of Otsu.

During the early Edo period, local artists began painting and selling pictures as souvenirs for travelers. The pictures started out as religious art, but the artists soon developed their own irreverent style. The artworks quickly became popular and were called *otsu-e*.