

### **Saga Toriimoto Historic Street**

The scenic town of Saga Toriimoto lies in the Okusaga area of western Kyoto along an ancient pilgrimage route to Atago Shrine. A 30-minute walk from such popular spots in Arashiyama as the Togetsukyo Bridge, Tenryuji Temple, and the Sagano Bamboo Forest takes visitors to the foot of Mt. Atago. The road passes several museums, historic sites, and temples, including Adashino Nenbutsuji, which memorializes 8,000 grave markers of people buried in the area over the centuries, and Otagi Nenbutsuji, famous for its 1,200 statues of arhats (*rakan*).

Many well-maintained houses from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century line the main street of Saga Toriimoto, and the area was nationally designated one of Kyoto's four Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings in 1979. It features a mix of traditional townhouses and farmers' houses with latticed windows, stucco walls, and tiled or thatched roofs. While close to the bustling Arashiyama, Saga Toriimoto has maintained its historic atmosphere for centuries, surrounded by mountains and fields that add to its appeal.

A settlement of farmers, foresters, and fishermen already existed there by the end of the sixteenth century, but as the number of pilgrims to Atago Shrine grew, the settlement developed into a shrine town that catered to the needs of travelers. Toriimoto means "at the foot of the shrine gate," which refers to the large vermilion gate at the end of the town's main street, the first torii gate of Atago Shrine. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was a flourishing town where merchants' and farmers' houses stood alongside shops and teahouses that accommodated passing pilgrims.

Some of the historic buildings of Saga Toriimoto continue to serve as private residences even in modern times. Others have been repurposed into cafés, teahouses, antique stores, or specialty gift shops, offering a variety of ways to explore the townscape and the neighboring sites. A well-preserved merchant house was renovated to become the Saga Toriimoto Town Preservation Center where visitors can learn more about the neighborhood and its history.

### **Saga Toriimoto Town Preservation Center**

The Saga Toriimoto Town Preservation Center was originally a merchant house dating back to the early Meiji era (1868–1912). The building was renovated in 1993 to serve as

a museum and to promote and help maintain the traditional townscape. The house itself is a particularly well-preserved example of Meiji-era architecture that offers a glimpse of what life was like in the area 150 years ago. Its exterior features fine latticework on the ground floor, a second story with white stucco walls and slatted “insect cage” windows (*mushiko mado*), and a big chimney atop a tiled roof. Except for the wide front of the building, this style closely resembles Kyoto’s traditional townhouses. The interior contains a large cooking hearth, an indoor well, and several connected rooms that look out onto a garden.

The rooms now display a wide assortment of photographs, historic maps, and architectural diagrams of the Saga Toriimoto Preservation District and other nationally designated groups of traditional buildings in Kyoto. A large diorama offers a bird’s-eye view of the surrounding area as it existed in 1930, including the historic town, nearby shrines and temples, and the train line that used to run through the area. Also depicted is Mt. Mandara, where small fires lined up in the shape of a giant torii gate are lit each summer on August 16th as part of Kyoto’s famous Gozan no Okuribi festival, which includes five such sites lighting fires in various shapes.

Written information at the center is primarily in Japanese, but abundant visuals allow for an immersive experience of the history and atmosphere of the neighborhood.