

Susa Jinja Shrine

This shrine is located on the site where, according to ancient legends, the god Susanoo no Mikoto chose to spend eternity, surrendering his body and becoming one with the natural environment. His spirit is believed to pervade the entire valley where the shrine stands. Although Susanoo is also enshrined on the grounds of the more famous Grand Shrine at Izumo (Izumo Taisha), Susa Jinja has long been considered his true shrine, despite its relative modesty. According to mythology, Susanoo defeated an eight-headed snake demon named Yamata no Orochi and discovered a miraculous sword in its tail. He claimed the princess Inata as his wife, and began searching for a place to build a palace. Upon arriving at the valley, Susanoo said to the princess, “This place fills my heart with ease and refreshment. Let us give it my name and settle here.”

The Shrine Location

According to historical records, Susa Jinja was moved to the present site from its original location on a nearby hillside, and has been rebuilt and modified many times over the centuries. The shrine is laid out parallel to the Susa River, which runs next to it and delineates the site. A special black-lacquered ceremonial bridge intended for the use of dignitaries once spanned the river. In addition to the main hall (*honden*), which is considered the house of the god, the shrine precincts include several smaller shrine buildings and other structures. A shrine to the goddess Amaterasu Omikami, Susanoo’s older sister, stands opposite the *honden*, a short distance away.

The Entrance to the Shrine

Visitors to Susa Jinja first pass through the Zuijin-mon, a small roofed wooden gate that houses a pair of protective lion-like guardian figures (*komainu*) painted in gold and other bright colors. The path then passes between a set of minor shrine buildings on either side, and arrives at the *haiden*, an enclosed prayer hall located in front of the *honden*. Prayers and offerings are customarily made here. Like most shrines built in this style, this one has a long, roofed staircase leading from the *haiden* to the *honden*, which only shrine priests are permitted to ascend. All others must go around to the side to view the *honden*.

The shrine site is heavily wooded, with only narrow pathways to either side of the *honden*, so the initial view of the 12-meter-tall building is surprising. Visitors must crane their necks to get a full view in the narrow space, which increases the visual

impact. A *honden* of similar design, but twice as tall, was built here in the 1500s; the current structure dates from the nineteenth century.

Built in the Style of the Grand Shrine

The *honden* is raised on high wooden pillars in a style called *taisha-zukuri* (Grand Shrine style), modeled after Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine, and is built of unpainted cedar wood. The roof is covered with cedar shingles, and features customary shrine decorations called *katsuo* and *chigi* on its ridge. The former are tapered cylinders laid horizontally, while the latter are crossed wooden members that rise in a V-shape from the ends of the roof ridges. The *honden* is surrounded by a handsome fence of cedar boards, and though there are small gates on each side, visitors are not allowed to enter. According to Shinto belief, the inner precincts are concealed from human view in order to protect the gods from the shock of our ugliness and imperfections.

Behind the *honden* is a giant cedar tree called Ohsugi-san. It is over 2 meters in diameter and, at more than 30 meters high, is the tallest cedar tree in the region. Historical records suggest that it is over 1,300 years old, making it an honored ancient living being. Its gnarled roots snake across the ground, and many worshippers come to touch them and make offerings to the spirit of the tree.

The Seven Wonders of Susa Jinja

Susa Jinja is known for its legendary “Seven Wonders,” including a well, called Shionoi, which produces salt water and was believed to mysteriously connect to the distant ocean. Other wonders included a cherry tree called Kagenashi-zakura, which did not cast a shadow, and a pine tree called Aioi-no-matsu that exhibited both male and female genders. Fallen oak leaves with holes recall another wonder: an oak tree and a pine tree that sprouted after Princess Inata gave birth and wrapped the afterbirth in oak leaves tied with pine needles. The Amatsubo, a grass-filled hole in a stone in a nearby rice paddy, was said to create a flood if it was disturbed. Horses called *shinme*, believed to be the steeds of the gods, were once kept at the shrine, and would predict disasters by turning white. The final wonder is the *hoshi-namera*, white spots that frequently appear on patches of rock on the mountainsides across the Susa River. The number of visible white spots is believed to foretell the quality of the harvest.