

## Mihonoseki Port Town

Mihonoseki is a small, historic port town that sits on a picturesque crescent-shaped bay. It flourished for centuries as a wealthy and influential trading port for *kitamaebune* cargo ships carrying iron, pottery, sake, and other goods to and from the Edo (Tokyo) and Osaka regions, as well as for ships conducting trade with the Asian continent. Today, though the local fleet is devoted to fishing instead of trade, the town retains much of its historic atmosphere.

### *The Gods of Miho Shrine*

A large torii gate at the harbor that marks the entrance to the Miho Shrine attests to the sacred character of the bay and the cape which shelters it. The shrine, which dates back to the eighth century, is dedicated to the god Ebisu, also known as Kotoshironushi, who protects fishermen and commerce and ensures financial prosperity. It also honors the goddess Mihotsuhime, who fosters fertility, marital harmony, and easy childbirth and is the deity of poetry, dance, and music. The shrine has an unusual arrangement of two side-by-side main halls (*honden*) that are integrated into a single main building tucked into the thickly forested hillside. Ebisu-sama is enshrined in the hall on the left, which is called the Ninogozen; Mihotsuhime is on the right, in the Ogozen. Between them is a room called the *shozoku no ma* (garment room). As is typical of Shinto shrines, these halls can only be entered by shrine priests during ceremonies. They are surrounded by a roofed wooden fence of cedar with high slatted openings that offer a limited view of the interior of the precinct.

The current main halls were built in 1813, and are made primarily of local pine with thick cedar-shingled roofs in a style called *taisha-zukuri*, derived from Izumo Taisha. They are raised on high wooden posts and reached by steep roofed stairs. The male-female duality of the halls is indicated by rooftop decorations called *chigi*, narrow wooden planks which jut upward in a V-shaped configuration. The ends of those on the hall dedicated to Ebisu, the male, are cut vertically, while those on the hall of Mihotsuhime, the female, are cut horizontally. In this way the gender of the deity can be easily discerned even from a distance. This main shrine structure is a nationally designated Important Cultural Property.

### *A Sheltered Gathering Place*

Directly in front of the main shrine building and partly shielding it from view is a large

open-walled worship hall called the *haiden*. This unusual example of Japanese shrine architecture was designed in 1928 by the well-known Japanese architect Ito Chuta. Standing on a high stone plinth and approached by a wide stone staircase, it is built from Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) and roofed with cedar shingles. The overall form and structure are intended to emulate a large boathouse, and its deep interior is spacious enough to accommodate large crowds for ceremonies and performances. The structural framework of the building is entirely visible from inside, and although it is a relatively modern building, it embodies a very traditional aesthetic of superb materials and craftsmanship. A roofed surrounding corridor and central gate are also part of the compound.

#### *The “Blue Stones” of the Harbor Front*

On the road to the harbor from Miho Shrine is a narrow pedestrian street branching off to the left. This street is called Aoishi-datami, or “blue-stone paving,” because the stone paving takes on a bluish sheen when wet. It has long been the town’s main thoroughfare, running parallel to the harbor and providing a route from the Miho Shrine to Bukkokuji Temple a few hundred meters away. As the city grew prosperous during the Edo period (1603–1867), the street came to be lined on both sides with dozens of shipping wholesalers who operated inns for sailors and pilgrims on their upper floors, their eaves nearly touching in the center of the narrow thoroughfare. Many were conveniently located on the harbor front, directly abutting the beach where the ships pulled in. The stone paving was added in the late eighteenth century to ease the carting of goods back and forth, while narrow covered alleys cut tunnel-like between the harbor-front establishments and were used to bring cargo from ships to the Aoishi-datami road.

#### *Raucous Entertainment Quarters*

In his writings, the famed nineteenth-century author Lafcadio Hearn describes the evening scene of hundreds of lanterns in the upper floors of the harbor-front inns and pleasure houses reflected in the calm waters of the bay, and the noisy nightly revels of sailors, gamblers, geisha, and dancing girls. Although those days have vanished, the town still has many bars and inns, including the Miho-kan, which has operated continuously since the seventeenth century. Its current building is a historic one, built in 1908, with banquet rooms artfully arranged on several levels around a central courtyard and covered by a glass roof. It has been designated a National Cultural Asset. Other attractions along Aoishi-datami include the Mihonoseki Museum, which occupies the

premises of a Meiji-era inn for sailors and portrays the history of the port and the cargo ships that plied their trade. The Mihonoseki Museum introduces the history of the town and displays historical artifacts donated by the prosperous Sasaki family that date back to the late seventeenth century, as well as photos of the rituals held by Miho Shrine.

#### *Reenacting Scenes from Ancient Myths*

The most ancient traditions of Mihonoseki are a pair of waterborne rituals held annually. The Morotabune ritual commemorates an ancient myth called Kuniyuzuri (Handing over the country), in which messengers from heaven arrived in Mihonoseki in a canoe to negotiate with the god Ebisu for the surrender of his lands in Izumo. In the ritual, held yearly on the afternoon of December 3, two large traditional canoes, each manned by six rowers and three other crew, race out to sea and back to the harbor, where they face each other and use their oars to splash cold ocean water on each other in mock battle. The colorfully decorated canoes are displayed in a glass-walled treasure house during the rest of the year.

The Aofushigaki (green brushwood) ritual, held on April 7, re-enacts another episode from the Kuniyuzuri myth. After the god Ebisu agreed that his father Okuninushi should hand over his land to the sun goddess Amaterasu, Ebisu decided to disappear from the visible world by hiding his ship in the sea behind an enclosure fenced with green brushwood. On the central day of the 13-day ritual, two fishing boats adorned with brushwood and banners are tied together in the harbor to represent Ebisu's enclosure. Two groups dressed in traditional costumes then board the boats while sacred dances and music are performed on another boat nearby. The boats are then beached below the torii gate that marks the entrance to Miho Shrine, and everyone goes to the shrine to make offerings to the gods. Aofushigaki marks the beginning of spring and the growth of life, while the Morotabune ritual marks the beginning of winter and the end of life.