

### **Mitarai: An Edo-period Port Town Unchanged by the Tides of Time**

The town of Mitarai was founded in 1666 during the Edo period (1603–1867), an era characterized by peace, prosperity, and the rise of the merchant class. This period was also characterized by isolationist policies that strictly limited Japan's contact with other countries. As a result, domestic trade became increasingly important, and official shipping routes were established to connect Osaka and Edo (now Tokyo) with the rest of Japan. The town of Mitarai, being positioned along a major shipping route, was an important port of call for trade ships carrying goods such as rice, alcohol, and salt. While the sailors waited for the tides to turn or the winds to change, local merchants restocked their ships with provisions and provided lodging, entertainment, and other services for the crews. Other businesses, such as teahouses and bathhouses (*sentō*) also catered to the visiting sailors. As a port town, Mitarai's fortunes were tightly bound to the overall domestic economy; as trade grew, Mitarai flourished.

In addition to merchants, important political figures also frequented Mitarai. Local daimyo stopped there when making trips to the capital, and during the tumultuous final years of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868), the port town's location relative to the domains of Hiroshima, Chōshū (now part of Yamaguchi Prefecture), and Satsuma (now part of Kagoshima Prefecture) made it a setting for political intrigue. One such event was the signing of the Mitarai Treaty, a secret agreement between the provinces of Chōshū and Geishū to form an alliance against the shogunate. This treaty was an important step in the fall of the shogunate, which led to the end of centuries of isolationism and the beginning of the modern period.

The advent of the Meiji era (1868–1912) was marked by rapid industrialization, including the modernization of the country's transportation systems through the development of a railway network. As maritime transport was replaced by rail transport, Mitarai's importance as a port town sharply declined, and its economic growth came to a sudden halt. As a result, much of Mitarai's Edo-period townscape remains unchanged to this day. In 1994, the national government designated Mitarai an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings.

### **Edo-period Architecture**

Historic Mitarai has many narrow, maze-like streets, and its traditional buildings are characterized by wooden lattice doors (*kōshido*) and tile roofs typical of the Edo period. Houses built later in the period can be distinguished by their "sea-cucumber walls"

(*namako kabe*). These walls are covered with tiles and sealed with white plaster, creating a geometric pattern that is said to resemble a sea cucumber. Plastered walls are more fire-resistant than wooden walls, and during the Edo period they were commonly used in the construction of warehouses and storehouses. Another notable feature among Mitarai's older buildings is their lack of a full second story. The Edo period was marked by explicit class divisions, and it was considered disrespectful to live above street level and look down on samurai in the streets below.

Mitarai's harbors still regularly receive boats from the surrounding islands of the Seto Inland Sea, and its former glory is still reflected in the buildings of its historic district.