

The Many Routes of the Saba Kaido

Mackerel was one of the major commodities shipped from the Wakasa region during the Edo period (1603–1867). It was freshly caught in the Sea of Japan and salted or fermented to preserve it for the journey to remote markets. The bulk of the fish was sent to Kyoto, which was the capital at the time, and the routes connecting Wakasa and Kyoto came to be known as the Saba Kaido, or “Mackerel Road.”

A Network of Trade Roads

Though the name “Saba Kaido” implies a single road, it was a branching network consisting of multiple trade routes. The most well-traveled was the Wakasa Kaido road, which passed through Kumagawa-juku post town and led to Kyoto via the villages of Kutsuki, Ohara, and Yase. The shortest way from the port town of Obama to Kyoto was the mountain trail along the Onyu River and through the Harihatagoe Pass, but it was very steep, making the journey quite challenging. Other roads connected Wakasa to the Tanba area north of Kyoto and to Lake Biwa in Omi Province (present-day Shiga Prefecture).

Only 72 Kilometers to Kyoto

An old expression in Wakasa states that “the far-off capital is only 18 *ri* away,” referring to the fact that the distance to Kyoto is approximately 72 km. Despite the challenging trek through the mountains, experienced porters carrying fish and other goods along the Saba Kaido could make the journey in just one day. As a haiku written by the renowned poet Yosa Buson (1716–1784) about the Saba Kaido reads: The people of Wakasa / Are well-accustomed to travel / Through the summer mountains.