

Matsuo Shrine

This isolated Shinto shrine on top of Mt. Matsuo has been a key part of the religious and cultural life of Tokamachi for more than a millennium. It also hosts a significant coming-of-age ceremony for young boys each spring.

Historical sources suggest the shrine was founded in 807 to honor the deity Nunakawahime, who was associated with ramie (a plant central to the region's weaving tradition). The current sanctuary, which dates to 1497, is among the oldest thatched-roofed wooden structures in Niigata Prefecture. It was registered an Important Cultural Property of Japan in 1978 and was fully rethatched in 2019.

The shrine's longevity in the punishing snow-country winters is partly due to its architecture. The steep slope of the thatched roof causes snow to slide off rather than build up, protecting the roof from potentially crushing loads. Numerous thick support columns help to bear the weight of snow and wet thatch.

The most significant festival at Matsuo Shrine is Nanatsu Mairi, held annually on May 8. Local boys who turned seven during the previous year make the journey from the village of Inubushi, at the foot of the mountain, to the shrine at its summit, a climb of 360 meters over about 3 kilometers. This is a challenging hike for children of that age, particularly as snow may still be on the ground, but the entire community comes out to help them ascend. After prayers and a ceremony at the shrine, everyone descends the mountain and the boys' extended families hold celebrations in their honor.

Two important artifacts belonging to the shrine are a short sword and a signaling fan (*gunbai*). The fan is said to have been offered to the enshrined deity by Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), a powerful daimyo who governed the area in the sixteenth century. For security reasons, the items are not housed in the shrine itself. Replicas are on display at the Matsudai History Museum.

With no road to the shrine other than a narrow mountain path, all tools and materials used to maintain the structure over its 500 years of existence have had to be carried to the site. Historically, residents undertook this labor themselves as a reflection of the shrine's importance to the community.