

Oharano Jinja Shrine

Oharano Jinja Shrine is also called the “Kasuga Shrine of Kyoto” due to its historical connection to the famous Kasuga Taisha Shrine in Nara. The deity worshipped at Kasuga shrines is Kasuga Daimyojin, who is traditionally depicted riding a white deer. Oharano Shrine is known for its deer-themed items, including statuary, amulets, and votive tablets. The grounds are a popular spot for viewing cherry blossoms, irises, water lilies, and maple leaves. Two teahouses, one along the entrance path and one near the parking lot outside the first torii gate, offer traditional mugwort sweets to enjoy as a light snack after the shrine visit or to take home.

History

There are many Kasuga shrines across the country. Among them, Oharano Shrine is considered the first to have been established by ritually welcoming the deity Kasuga Daimyojin from Kasuga Taisha, the head shrine. In 784, the capital of Japan was moved from Heijokyo (present-day Nara) to Nagaokakyo. Oharano Shrine was built by the noble Fujiwara family for Kasuga Daimyojin, their guardian deity, at a site chosen for its proximity to the new seat of government. The Fujiwara family was extremely influential at court for centuries: many of the men held high-ranking positions, and many of the women became empresses or imperial consorts. Much like at Kasuga Taisha Shrine, prayers were offered at Oharano Shrine for the country’s peace and prosperity. The shrine continued to fulfill this role even after the capital was moved to Heiankyo (present-day Kyoto) in 794.

Kasuga Daimyojin and the Fujiwara Family

Kasuga Daimyojin represents four divinities: the deity of thunder Takemikazuchi no Mikoto, the warrior deity Iwainushi no Mikoto, the Fujiwara family ancestral deity Ame no Koyane no Mikoto, and his wife Hime Okami. The son of Ame no Koyane no Mikoto, Ame no Oshikumone no Mikoto, is often worshipped alongside them. All these deities are believed to have played important roles in the creation of Japan. They are said to answer prayers related to political affairs, protection, wisdom, and auspicious marriages for women.

Throughout history, Oharano Shrine benefited from Fujiwara family support and imperial patronage. Emperor Montoku (827–858), whose grandfather was the head of the Fujiwara family, ordered the construction of several grand worship halls in 850. It became a

tradition for the Fujiwara to pray for newborn daughters at Oharano Shrine, hoping that they would be chosen as empresses or imperial consorts. If the prayer was answered, an elaborate procession would visit the shrine to express gratitude to the deities. Such processions are mentioned in historical records, poems, and novels, including *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), written by the lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu (973?–1014?), a Fujiwara branch family member. When the prominent poet Ariwara no Narihira (825–880) accompanied a Fujiwara lady on her pilgrimage, he wrote the following poem:

The deities of Oharano Shrine at the base of Mt. Oshio
Must recall the age of the gods themselves
Seeing our grand procession on this day

Shrine Grounds

The path through the torii gates and into the shrine grounds goes past the Koisawa Pond and its striking vermilion bridge. On the far bank is Wakamiya Shrine, dedicated to the deity Ame no Oshikumone no Mikoto. The fenced-off weeping cherry tree nearby is called Senganzakura (“thousand-eye cherry tree”) for the many large flowers that bloom in round clusters on its branches. The tree has another nickname, “fleeting-dream cherry tree,” inspired by the fact that its peak bloom period only lasts three days. It is said that a thousand wishes will come true for those lucky enough to see Senganzakura in full bloom.

Farther along the approach is a water basin for ritual purification, where the water pours from the mouth of a bronze deer. The sumo ring on the left-hand side of the path is used for Kamizumo, a ritual wrestling competition for both adults and children that takes place during the Mitakarisai Festival in September. The celebration is held to thank the deities for the good harvest and has continued uninterrupted since 1717.

Main Sanctuary

Beyond the third torii gate on the shrine’s primary path is the main sanctuary, which dates to 1822. It is built in the *kasuga-zukuri* style, with a central altar for offerings and prayers flanked by two shrine halls on either side, each housing one of the four divinities of Kasuga Daimyōjin. Tall cypress trees behind the complex create a natural contrast with the classic white and vermilion structures. Several subsidiary shrines on the left are dedicated to deities offering protection from diseases and misfortune. They are also believed to grant abundant harvests and commercial success, good health, longevity, and conception.

Sacred Deer Messengers

According to legend, Kasuga Daimyōjin appeared to an ancestor of the Fujiwara family riding a white deer, so these animals came to be regarded as sacred messengers of the deity. For this reason, stone statues of a male and a female deer guard the main sanctuary of Oharano Shrine instead of the usual mythical *komainu* figures. Deer themes can also be seen in the shrine's *omamori* amulets, *goshuincho* seal books, *ema* votive tablets, and *omikuji* fortunes.