

## **Tamaki Shrine and the Omine Okugakemichi**

(Web)

This ancient shrine is one of Japan's oldest sacred sites. Sitting on the summit of Mt. Tamaki (1,076 m), it is believed to have been founded in 37 BCE during the reign of the legendary Emperor Sujin as a means of protecting his castle from fires and evil spirits. But myths about the spot go back even further to those concerning Jimmu (721–585 BCE), Japan's first emperor, who legends say was guided through the area by a mythical crow-god as he battled his way northward from his Kyushu domain.

In the early eighth century, the shrine had another important visitor. En no Gyoja (634–706) was the founder of Shugendo, the tradition of asceticism that embraces elements of Shinto and Buddhism along with the ancient worship of natural phenomena. He chose it as one of the sacred training sites along the mountainous trail between the religious centers of Yoshino and Kumano, now known as the Omine Okugakemichi pilgrimage route. Beginning in the Heian period (794–1185), the Tamaki religious complex flourished as a training center for Shugendo, and by the eighteenth century, some 200 monks resided at the temple there.

After the Japanese government ordered the separation of Shinto and Buddhism during the Meiji era (1868–1912), most Buddhist structures on shared shrine grounds throughout Japan were destroyed, but at Tamaki Shrine elements of its temple past were repurposed or retained. Today, this sacred spot, which includes not only the shrine but the forest and mountain where it sits, is visited by travelers on the rugged 100-kilometer pilgrimage route and other worshipers in search of purification and healing.

In 2004, the 30,000-square-meter Tamaki Shrine complex was registered as a World Heritage Site as part of the “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range.”

[NOTE: If a map of the grounds is included on the website, the following could be added with symbols or numbers indicating the location.]

### **Major Structures and Features**

**Main Hall:** This 200-year-old building is constructed of *keyaki* (zelkova) wood. It houses the shrine’s main deities, including Kunitokotachi no Mikoto (the first deity to appear when the Earth and the heavens were created), Izanagi no Mikoto, Izanami no Mikoto, and Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess.

**Mihashira Shrine:** The three deities housed in this auxiliary shrine are worshiped for protection from various ailments and for maritime safety.

**Tamaishi Shrine:** This subordinate shrine, located halfway between the Main Hall and the peak of Mt. Tamaki, has no built structure, reflecting the tradition of nature worship in ancient Japan. It consists of a partially buried black rock surrounded by white pebbles set in an enclosure among Japanese cedars. This is thought to be the origin of Tamaki Shrine, and is revered as a power spot.

**Shrine Office and Kitchen:** This structure was built in 1804 as the main hall and kitchen of a Buddhist temple within the shrine complex. The interior sliding doors are decorated with acclaimed late Edo-period paintings of flora and fauna. It is designated an Important Cultural Property.

**Omikoshiden:** A *mikoshi*, or portable shrine, is housed here except during the annual festival on October 24, when it is paraded through the shrine grounds.

**Giant Cedar Trees:** The grounds of the shrine are home to a number of ancient Japanese cedar (*sugi*) trees, preserved thanks to a long prohibition on logging. These include the 3,000-year-old Jindai-sugi; the O-sugi, 50 meters high with a circumference of 11 meters; and the Meoto-sugi, two massive trees joined at the trunk (*meoto* means “wedded”).