

## **Saigandenji Temple: A Short History**

With a roughly 1,300-year history, Saigandenji is one of the oldest temples in Kyushu. It is said to have been established in 726 by a monk from India named Saiei. The current small structure, which dates from August 2022, replaced a larger 1890 building that was badly damaged by the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes and the volcanic activity that followed them.

The temple has been battered by the tides of human history as well as by natural disasters. It was once a thriving center of volcano worship (*kazan shinko*), a place of pilgrimage for courting couples, and the focus of a complex of rustic temples and hermitages occupied by mountain ascetics. At the start of the Meiji era (1868–1912), however, the new nationalist government decided to forcibly separate Buddhism and Shintoism, treating the former as an unwelcome foreign import. It forced the closure of the temple because both the Eleven-faced Kannon (a Buddhist bodhisattva) and Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto (the Shinto deity of the mountain) were worshipped there. The main temple was transferred to the town of Aso in 1871. As anti-Buddhist fervor gradually faded over time, however, the mountaintop temple was rebuilt in 1890 to serve pilgrims.