

Saigandenji Temple

This temple is one of the oldest in all of Kyushu. It is said to have been founded in 726 by a monk from India named Saiei. In 1871, the temple was closed down and moved to the foot of the mountain because the new and strongly nationalist Meiji government declared its disapproval of Buddhism as a foreign import and wanted to draw a clear line between Buddhism and Shinto, which had become intertwined over the centuries.

The temple was rebuilt in 1890 in response to demand from pilgrims. That structure stood here until it was badly damaged by the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes and the volcanic activity that followed. The present building dates from August 2022.

The deity of the temple is the Buddhist bodhisattva known as the Eleven-faced Kannon. However, the primary goal of the sutras that the monks chant is to discourage Mt. Aso's sacred crater from erupting. Volcanic eruptions are harmful to the entire Aso caldera, polluting the drinking water, damaging the rice crops, and poisoning the grass that cattle graze on.

The stone path behind the temple used to be the only route up to the crater. Only clergy were allowed to climb all the way to the top; ordinary people had to stop at a barrier around 150 meters up. There, courting couples would pledge their troth prior to marriage in a tradition that flourished until the Taisho era (1912–1926).