

Walking Tour of Seki Juku

Seki Juku flourished as one of the stations established by the Tokugawa shogunate on the Tokaido road that linked Edo and Kyoto during the Edo period (1603–1867). As early as the Heian period (794–1185), however, Seki Juku was already a crucial junction on the pilgrimage route from Kyoto to Ise Grand Shrine. For that reason, visitors are often advised to see the town starting at the east end, where the road to Ise forks south from the Tokaido. The road leading to Ise is straddled by a great wooden torii gate from Ise Grand Shrine itself. This was presented to Seki Juku in 2013, when the shrine was rebuilt according to a 20-year cycle that has been in place since 1690.

The majority of the 400 buildings along the 1.8-kilometer stretch of road through Seki Juku are from the late Edo period and mid-Meiji era (1868–1912), although some structures are even older. One, the Aizendo, a hall behind Seki Jizoin Temple, was constructed in 1630; it is the oldest building in all of Mie Prefecture.

Heading west down the road, the first stop is the Seki no Yama Kaikan, a museum devoted to the large and showy two-story floats that have been the centerpiece of Seki Juku's annual summer festival since around 1700.

A short distance beyond the museum is Okeju, a cooperage where wooden barrels and buckets are still made by hand. Okeju presents a rare opportunity to observe highly skilled workmanship in this vanishing craft. Another singular detail is the circular pendants on the eave-end tiles decorated with the kanji character *utsuwa*, meaning “vessel” or “container,” to reflect what is made there.

A little further ahead is the Seki Machinami Museum, which occupies the first house to be restored after the town was declared a conservation zone in the mid-1980s. The museum is designed to give an idea of how ordinary people lived in Seki Juku during its heyday.

Set back slightly from the street on the north side stands a *dashigura*, a special high-ceilinged warehouse designed to accommodate one of the *yama* (tall floats) for Seki Juku's summer festival. Diagonally across the street from there is Hyakurokuri-tei, a small public park that contains a building, Chokan-tei, with a roof terrace offering unimpeded views across the tiled rooftops in both directions. To the west, the high roof

of Seki Jizoin Temple is visible, and beyond it, the Suzuka Mountains.

Just past Hyakurokuri-tei is a large building bearing the sign Matsui Denki (Matsui Electric). Now the headquarters of a construction company, this used to be one of the town's two primary inns (*honjin*) reserved for the exclusive use of the highest-ranking guests. The building is depicted in the famous ukiyo-e series *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido Road* by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858).

A bit further along is the Sekijuku Hatago Tamaya Historical Museum, formerly the Tamaya inn. Easy to recognize thanks to the distinctive “flame window” looking onto the street from the second floor, Tamaya was once the largest inn in Seki Juku. The grand annex for important visitors at the back of the inn has a scale and splendor unlike anything else in Seki, and is one of the town's highlights.

Diagonally across the street from Tamaya is a cluster of historic shops. The same family has been running the Fukagawaya confectionery store for 14 generations; the current building, with its famous roofed signpost, dates from 1784. As well as selling traditional sweets, the shop serves as a miniature museum. Exhibits include ornate delivery boxes from the eighteenth century. One, decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, was for the emperor's exclusive use.

Immediately next door is Ocha no Kaneki, a tea shop that traces its history back to 1865. Mie is Japan's third-biggest tea-producing prefecture after Shizuoka and Kagoshima, and its teas are notable for their umami flavor. Tea tasting is available here upon request.

Facing these two shops, a reproduction of the old public notice board (*kosatsuba*) of the Edo-period shogunate stands at the west end of the post office. The most important information the board provided was a list of the official tariffs for the various services available in the post-station town, such as rental horses or porters, all of which were regulated by the authorities.

Further down the road is another historic shop, Maedaya Seika, which specializes in confections made from rice flour with bean jam inside.

The next stop along the road is Seki Jizoin Temple. Founded in 741, it contains the first statue of the bodhisattva Jizo (Ksitigarbha) in Japan. The town itself incorporated the

word “Jizo” into its name – it was originally known as Seki no Jizo Juku. The practice of dressing Jizo statues in bibs (reflecting Jizo’s role as a protector of children) is also said to have originated in Seki Juku. The Aizendo hall just behind the temple’s main worship hall is the oldest building in Mie Prefecture.

The stretch of four buildings just opposite the temple is famous for providing a neat snapshot of architectural styles of different eras in Japan. Going west to east from the Aizuya restaurant to the Ozaki liquor store, the individual buildings progress chronologically from the Edo period through the Meiji era and the Taisho era (1912–1926) to the Showa era (1926–1989).

Visitors who are tired at this point may wish to head north and take a refreshing footbath free of charge at Koman no Yu, a public hot spring adjoining the visitor center. Those with energy to spare are encouraged to keep walking west toward the Suzuka Mountains as far as Nishi no Oiwake (West Fork), where the road to Nara used to branch off the Tokaido. The buildings at this end of Seki Juku are more modest in size. Some have yet to be restored, and there are no commercial establishments, so this part of town retains an atmosphere of Old Japan that is hard to find elsewhere.