

The History of Seki Juku

Seki Juku was at its most prosperous during the Edo period (1603–1867), when it flourished as the 47th of the 53 post stations on the Tokaido road joining Edo and Kyoto. In 1843, Seki had two primary inns (*honjin*) for daimyo lords, nobles, and shogunal officials; two secondary inns (*wakihonjin*) for slightly less important people; and 42 ordinary inns, some of which could accommodate hundreds of travelers.

The town is located on the traditional border between eastern and western Japan where the Suzuka Mountains form a steep natural barrier, and at the junction of the Tokaido with the road heading south to take pilgrims to Ise Grand Shrine. Because of this, Seki Juku was already a significant place nearly 1,000 years before shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu and his successors constructed the Five Routes that linked Edo, the shogun's capital, with the provinces.

Seki Jizoin Temple, on the west side of Seki Juku, was constructed in 741 by Gyoki (668–749) – a Buddhist priest who played a key role in the building of Todaiji Temple in Nara – to protect the town from smallpox. The Jizo statue here is the oldest in Japan; the tradition of dressing these deities in bibs (Jizo is worshipped as a protector of children) is also thought to have originated here. In fact, the town was originally known as “Seki no Jizo Juku,” with “Jizo” as part of its name. The name “Seki” comes from the Suzuka Barrier (Suzuka no Seki), the fortified checkpoint at the west end of town that was one of three barriers erected during the Nara period (710–794) to protect the region around the imperial capital. “Juku” is a suffix indicating a place of lodging, i.e., a post town.

In the Heian period (794–1185), emperors started traveling through Seki Juku on their way to Ise Grand Shrine, the oldest Shinto shrine in Japan. Over time, the popularity of Ise as a place of pilgrimage continued to grow, with hundreds of thousands of people visiting annually during the Edo period.

Although Seki continues to be a major transportation hub today, changes to the local road system long ago diverted most foot and vehicle traffic from the old Tokaido road. Ironically, this meant that the town was still in an excellent state of preservation in 1984, when it was designated a conservation zone and concerted efforts to repair and restore its buildings began. Thanks to 40 years of effort, Seki Juku now offers a streetscape of some 400 buildings, stretching nearly two kilometers, that powerfully evokes the atmosphere of the Edo period and the Meiji era (1868–1912).