

Ryugenji Mabu Mine Shaft

The mine shaft you are about to enter is perhaps one of the most significant of the nearly 1,000 mining tunnels and shafts that have been discovered at Iwami Ginzan. Ryugenji Mabu was opened in 1715 under the direct administration of the Tokugawa shogunate via the local magistrate's office and operated for two centuries. It was extended several times over the years, eventually reaching a length of nearly 600 meters. The first 177 meters are now open to visitors. The silver mined here was an important source of revenue for the shogunate, which ruled Japan between 1603 and 1867.

The original tunnel was dug using chisels and hammers and was only just wide enough for miners to squeeze through in a single file. The many shafts that branch out from the main passage, which were dug to follow silver veins, give an indication of the extremely confined conditions miners worked in. The main passage does not seem as confined because modern drilling equipment was used to expand it to accommodate carts in the latter

half of the nineteenth century. Vertical shafts, some up to 100 meters deep, were used to drain groundwater away from the miners and prevent flooding within the mine.

Although mining at Ryugenji Mabu ceased a long time ago, there is still plenty of silver in the ground here. One telltale sign of this is the presence of the Asian common lady fern (*hebino-negoza*), a low-growing, bright green plant with arching fronds that thrives in soil with a high concentration of heavy metals.