



NARA

THE BIRTHPLACE OF JAPAN

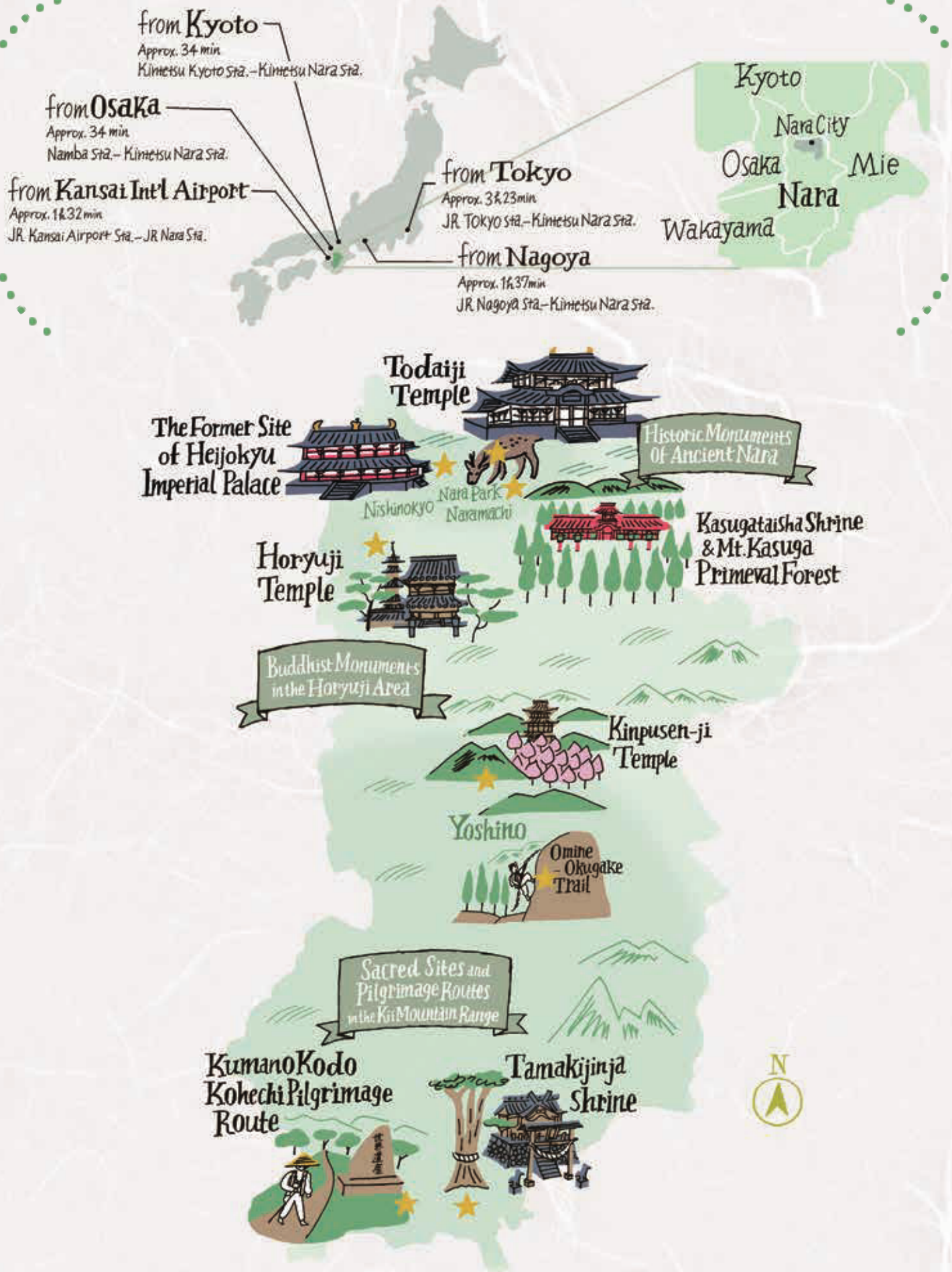
JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF JAPAN

Nara is the historic and spiritual heart of Japan.

It is where the nation's first capital city was established in 710 and where Buddhism first flourished in the country.

Close to Kyoto and Osaka and easily accessible by train, the region is a living history book, full of World Heritage sites and distinctive temples and shrines. Ancient Nara was a major trade centre at the most eastern point on the Silk Road, and today the area is a vast repository of precious artifacts originating from the Eurasian continent. Modern-day Nara is still a major centre for culture and the arts in Japan. Quieter, more unspoilt and rural in comparison to its neighbours, Nara offers a relaxed vacation experience and a glimpse of the real Japan.

TRAVEL TO NARA



A WORLD HERITAGE DESTINATION

The history of Japan as a unified state begins in Nara during the Kofun period (300-710), developing further in the Nara period (710-794) with the adoption of a centralized bureaucracy and the rise of a civilization incorporating Buddhist ideology. A pivotal time in Japanese history, the 8th century was a very cosmopolitan era with considerably significant interaction between Japan and China and the rest of the world via the Silk Road.

The ancient and very unique history and culture of the Nara region have earned it World Heritage recognition and worldwide renown. Currently, Nara has three individual World Heritage sites, more than any other prefecture in Japan. These span ancient monuments, historic pilgrimage routes, and archaeological sites. To visit them is to understand Nara's contributions to the history and culture of Japan, and its relationship to the rest of the world.

1

BUDDHIST MONUMENTS IN THE HORYUJI AREA

The first Japanese site to be inscribed onto the World Heritage List, of the 48 buildings in and around the Horyuji temple site, 11 were constructed before or during the 8th century and are the oldest surviving wooden buildings in the world. The temple has played an enormous role in the development of Buddhism and the arts and architecture of Japan.

Western Precinct of the Horyuji temple complex



Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.

Roofed corridor surrounding the Western Precinct



Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.

HISTORIC MONUMENTS OF ANCIENT NARA

Nara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 784. This was a time of flourishing arts, architecture and political and cultural exchange with the rest of the world. Eight parts of Nara that exemplify that time have been added to the World Heritage List. These include the Former Site of the Imperial Palace at Heijokyo, Todaiji Temple, Kohfukuji Temple, Yakushiji Temple, Toshodaiji Temple and Gangoji Temple, along with the Mt. Kasuga Primeval Forest and Kasugataisha, a shrine with 1300 years of history and a historical importance on par with the great temples of Nara.

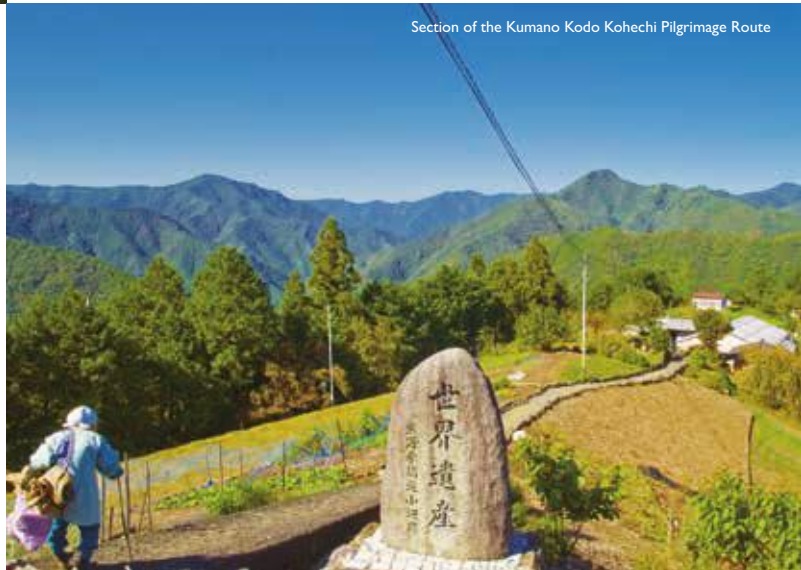


Mt. Kasuga Primeval Forest

SACRED SITES AND PILGRIMAGE ROUTES IN THE KII MOUNTAIN RANGE

World Heritage pilgrimage routes run through the mountains of southern Nara Prefecture. This, the Yoshino and Omine area, includes Mt. Yoshino, famous for its cherry blossoms, and as a centre of Shugendo, a fusion of Buddhism and Shinto nature worship dating back to the 12th century. For many, travelling these paths awakens a deep sense of reverence for nature. Pilgrims still walk these routes today.

Section of the Kumano Kodo Kohechi Pilgrimage Route



Kinpusen-ji Temple in spring



Practitioner of the Shugen sect of ascetic Buddhism blowing a conch shell

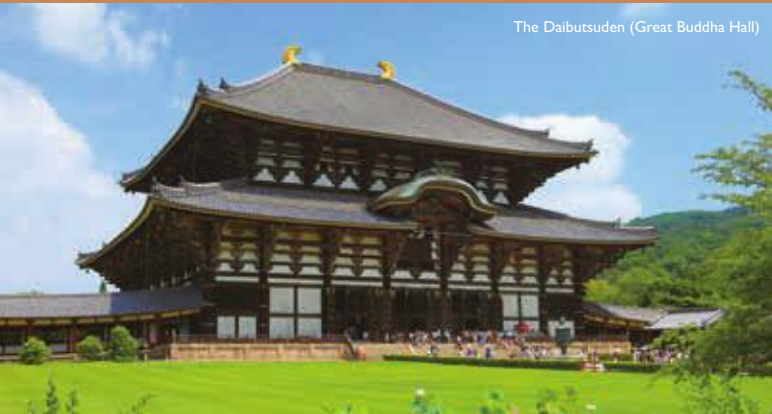


Tamakijinja Shrine in spring

THE GREAT TEMPLES OF NARA

TODAIJI TEMPLE

The Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall)



The Great Buddha and intricate wooden interior of the Daibutsuden



View from the Nigatsudo hall at sunset



Todaiji's Daibutsuden, or Great Buddha Hall, is one of the largest wooden structures in the world. It dates to the first half of the 8th century, when Emperor Shomu had Todaiji Temple established to preside over the provincial state-subsidized temples of the time. The original temple complex comprised two seven-storey pagodas believed to have been 100 metres tall. These would have been some of the tallest man-made structures in existence. Unfortunately, neither pagoda remains and the present Great Buddha Hall itself is a reconstruction completed in 1709. Despite being a third smaller in width than the original hall, the current 48-metre-tall structure is still very impressive.

The Great Buddha housed within the Daibutsuden is an image of Rushana, central to the teachings of Kegon Buddhism, the cosmic Buddha who oversees the well-being of everything in the cosmos. The figure was cast from over 500 tonnes of bronze and partially gilded. It is 15 metres tall and still the world's largest bronze Buddha. Its construction was a national project and an incredible accomplishment at that time.

In addition to the Great Buddha, the two 13th-century Nio warrior figures that stand guard at the South Gate are particularly noteworthy. They were carved by Unkei and Kaikei, two renowned sculptors of the Kamakura Period (1185-1333).

An extensive collection of invaluable 7th and 8th century artworks and artifacts from the Silk Road is stored in the Shosoin Treasure Repository. Some pieces from the collection are displayed at the Nara National Museum.

Todaiji covers a vast area in the north of Nara Park. Set aside at least a half-day to fully explore the complex.

KOHFUKUJI TEMPLE

Since its founding as Yamashinadera in 669, Kohfukuji has been relocated three times and suffered several fires. It has occupied its current location in Nara Park since shortly after the establishment of the capital in Heijo (part of the modern-day city of Nara) in 710.

None of the temple's original buildings remain but most have been reconstructed, some several times. The oldest reconstruction is the Three-Storeyed Pagoda, rebuilt just decades after the original was completed in 1143. The pagoda has an airy, graceful appearance and is an outstanding example of Heian-period (794-1185) Buddhist architecture.

The Central Golden Hall will be the most recent reconstruction upon its completion in 2018. The original, constructed between 710 and 714, was destroyed by fire a total of seven times. After the last in 1717, a century passed before a scaled-down temporary hall was erected in 1819. This was dismantled in 2000 to make way for the new structure that reproduces the size and architectural style to the original as accurately as possible.

Kohfukuji houses an exceptional collection of 8th-century treasures. One of the most revered is a sculpture of the Ashura, one of a group of eight mythological beings in Buddhism. Commissioned as part of an eight-piece set in 734, this Ashura is dry-lacquered, not cast in bronze or carved from wood as was common. Typically, Ashuras express anger and have a warrior-like form, but the one at Kohfukuji has a slender, boyish demeanour and soft facial expressions.

Kohfukuji is located at the western edge of Nara Park and one of the first attractions reached from Kintetsu Nara Station.

The Eastern Golden Hall and Five-Storeyed Pagoda



8th-century dry-lacquer sculpture of the Ashura



Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.

View from Sarusawa Pond at dusk



HORYUJI TEMPLE



Statue of the Kannon Bodhisattva

Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.



The Yumedono (Hall of Visions)

Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.

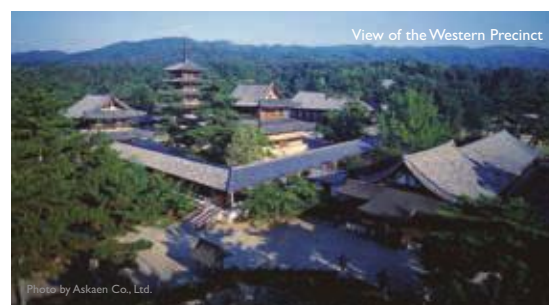
In the late 6th century, Buddhism spread in Japan under the rule of Prince Shotoku, regent to his aunt Empress Suiko.

Completed in 607 and commissioned by Shotoku in honour of his father, Horyuji is one of Japan's very first temples and the most significant extant repository of 7th century art and architecture.

The Main Hall, in the Western Precinct, houses the Shaka Triad, statues of impressive scale depicting Gautama Buddha flanked by two other Buddhas, Amitabha and Bhaisajyuguru. These date to 623 and the style originates from Northern Wei art (China, 386-535). Adjacent to the hall is an ornate five-storey pagoda which stands on a double stone terrace, a feature inherited from the continent and typical of Asuka-period (538-710) architecture. Both the pagoda and hall are artworks in their own right.

A later addition to the complex in 739, the Hall of Visions, built after the death of the prince regent, stands in the Eastern Precinct. Contained within the hall is an exceptionally well-preserved statue of the Kannon Bodhisattva, or Goddess of Mercy, carved from camphor wood and decorated with gold. From its consecration in the 8th century until 1884 when unraveled by a scholar, the Yumedono Kannon had been kept wrapped in cloth and never seen.

Horyuji is a short distance southwest of the city of Nara and easily reached by both train and bus.



View of the Western Precinct

Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.

YAKUSHIJI TEMPLE

Yakushiji Temple is laid out symmetrically in a style originating in China. The complex is entered through the South Gate. The most sacred area housing the main hall, or Kondo, is enclosed by a roofed corridor. Access to this compound is through a middle gate which gives a perfectly framed view of the Kondo.

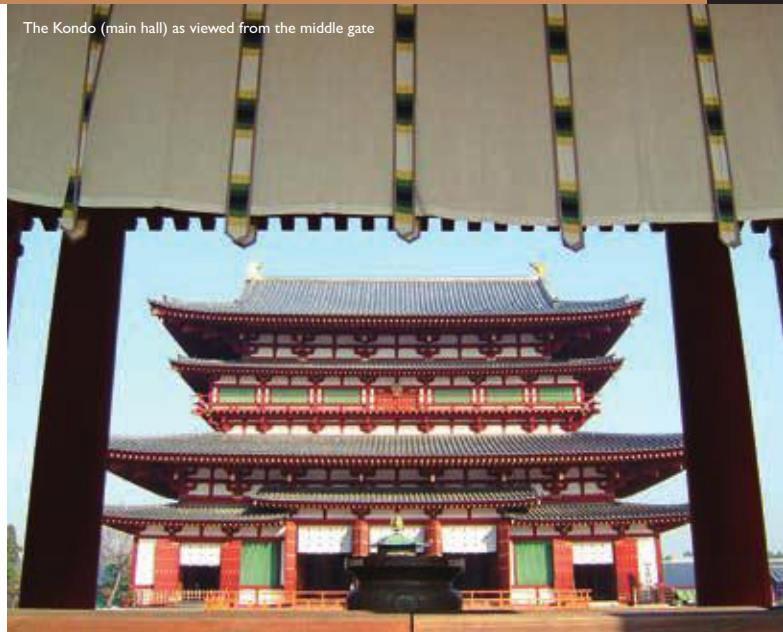
Although not original, the hall is a faithful reconstruction. Within the hall is a prized Yakushi Triad, a set of three sculptures, commissioned for the temple at its founding in 680 by Emperor Tenmu, to pray for the recovery of his ailing consort.

The main Buddha worshipped at Yakushiji and the central figure in the triad is Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing. Unlike other examples which depict this Buddha seated on a lotus pedestal with medicine pot in hand, the one at Yakushiji shows the Buddha empty-handed upon a large chest. Of particular interest are the designs in relief on the chest, which include a dragon, phoenix, lotus flowers, Hindu figures and grape vines. The motifs draw on the many different cultures along the Silk Road and attest to the international nature of the era. Originally gilded, fires and the weathering of time have left the Buddha and his two attendants with their current black sheen.

Also within the main compound are two pagodas. They stand to the left and right of the Kondo. The East Pagoda, on the right as you pass through the Middle Gate, dates to the 8th century.

Yakushiji Temple is located south of the Heijo Palace Site and a short walk from Toshodaiji Temple.

The Kondo (main hall) as viewed from the middle gate



The Yakushi Triad inside the main hall



Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.

View of Yakushiji at sunrise



Photo by Eiji Murakami

TOSHODAIJI TEMPLE



One-thousand-armed statue of the Kannon Bodhisattva

Photo by Askaen Co., Ltd.



Toshodaiji's elegant main hall

Of all the ancient Nara temples, Toshodaiji has suffered very little from fire or other disasters, and thus many of its original buildings still survive. The main hall, the Golden Hall, dates back to the 8th century. It is the only surviving example from the Nara period (710-794) and invaluable in the study of temple architecture. Similarly, the Kodo Lecture Hall, previously a state assembly hall, has survived intact and is the only extant example of the architecture of Heijo Palace.

The temple dates to 759 when it was founded by Ganjin, a Chinese priest from the Tang Dynasty, invited to Japan by Emperor Shomu to train priests and further propagate Buddhism in the country. His influence in the introduction of the religion was monumental and his teaching at Toshodaiji is considered an important part of that process.

Entering the complex through the Nandaimon southern gate, a tree lined path leads to the elegant main hall with its long, low roof and muted colours. Its beautiful proportions are sometimes compared with the Parthenon in Athens.

Impressive outside and in, the hall houses several statues including a standing figure of the Kannon Bodhisattva, the goddess of mercy. Known as Senju Kannon, this sculpture has one thousand arms and is one of the nation's oldest wooden Senju Kannon statues.

Toshodaiji, easily accessed from Nishinokyo Station, is within walking distance of Yakushiji Temple and the archaeological site of the Heijo Palace.



The bell tower and azaleas in spring



Yoshino in spring



Soni Highland in summer

NARA'S FOUR SEASONS



Namego Valley in autumn



Murooji Temple in winter

THE RISE OF NARA AND THE BIRTH OF JAPAN

Nara became Japan's first permanent capital in 710. The city was the most eastern point of the Silk Road and early Nara culture was heavily influenced by interchanges with continental Asia and Europe. 1300 years of modern Japanese civilization started here in Nara.



Jomon Period (14,000BC-300BC)

Prehistoric Japan was a tribal, hunter-gatherer society. Some of the world's earliest pottery dates to this period and much has been excavated in Nara. An excellent collection of artifacts from this period is displayed at the Archaeological Institute Museum in Kashihara, Nara.



Kofun Period (300-700)

Japanese recorded history starts in this period, when the country was increasingly centralised under the rule of the Imperial family. During this period the ruling classes built huge burial mounds, often keyhole in shape surrounded by a moat, many of which can still be seen in Nara.



Nara Period (710-794)

In 710, the Imperial residence was moved to Heijo (part of the present-day city of Nara) and Japan's first permanent capital was established. The layout of the city and its administrative buildings were modelled on Chang'an, the Chinese capital during the Tang Dynasty. Todaiji Temple and its Great Buddha statue were built by Emperor Shomu to unify the country.

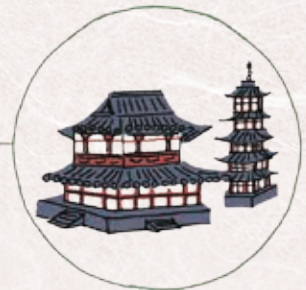
Yayoi Period (300BC - 300AD)

This period saw the development of metal tools and the beginning of rice cultivation. The Nara Basin is believed to be one of the first rice farming settlements. This was the age of myth and legends, when the native Shinto worship of nature was at its strongest. Around Sakurai and Mt. Miwa, there are stories of Himiko, a shaman queen who was believed to have ruled Japan at the beginning of the 3rd century.



Asuka Period (539-710)

Overlapping with the Kofun period, this is when Buddhism arrived from the Asian continent. Buddhist art and architecture flourished with Imperial support. Some of the greatest Buddhist temples in Japan, such as Horyuji, were founded during this period.



UNIQUELY NARA: TRADITIONAL CRAFTS & LOCAL SPECIALTIES



1	2	3
5		4

1. BAMBOO WHISKS

Tea came to Japan in the 8th century, prized initially for its medicinal properties. Over the centuries it became popular as a drink. The evolution of the tea ceremony led to the invention of the bamboo whisk in Nara, in the 15th century. They are still crafted here today.

2. NARA FUDE

Production of calligraphy brushes is another of Nara's traditional craft industries, dating back to the 7th century. The myriad of temples in Nara, the highest academic institutions at the time, created a strong demand for brushes. The brushes made in Nara are known as Nara Fude.

3. NARA SUMI

Ink production came to Japan with brushes in the early 7th century. The spread of Buddhism made ink an important commodity and Nara became a key production center. In the early 15th century,

a new method for creating superior quality ink was discovered at Kohfukuji Temple. This ink, Nara Sumi, is still produced in Nara today.

4. SOMEN

Somen, fine white noodles often eaten chilled in summer, originated in the Miwa area of Nara. The town became a centre for noodle-making because the area has plentiful pure spring water, is good for growing wheat, and is on the pilgrimage to Ise Shrine.

5. KAKINOHAZUSHI

In the towns along the pilgrimage routes running through Nara, a special type of sushi evolved. Kakinohazushi, literally meaning 'persimmon-leaf sushi', is a small portion of rice topped with a slice of raw salmon or mackerel and wrapped in a persimmon leaf. The leaves have anti-bacterial properties that keep the sushi fresh.

BORN IN NARA

The centre of innovation in Japan for over a thousand years, some of the most essential elements of Japanese culture originated in Nara. From Sake to Sumo, we have the inventive citizens of Nara to thank for adapting and refining these traditions.



Sake from Naraizumi Yusai

REFINED SAKE

Although sake itself wasn't invented in Nara, it was first refined at a Nara temple during the 15th century, a time when temples were the centre of sake production. Shoryakuji, a secluded temple in the mountains to the south of Nara City, had especially remarkable technical expertise. The monks there succeeded in finding a way to prevent sake from spoiling. In doing so, they made what was once a thick, cloudy brew mostly used for ceremonies, a pleasant, enjoyable drink.





Children learning sumo

Photo by Martin Holtkamp

SUMO WRESTLING

It is a well-known fact that sumo is the national sport of Japan, but what is not often common knowledge is that the sport originated 2,000 years ago in ancient Nara. The Nihonshoki, one of the first books of classical Japanese history, tells of a man with incredible strength named Taima no Kehaya. Boastful of his strength, he is said to have sought a formidable opponent. Hearing of Taima's quest, the ruling emperor appointed an opponent and ordered a match. It did not go in Taima's favour: he was killed with a powerful kick. The sport of sumo, no longer fatal, was born. Visitors to Nara can learn more at the Kehayaza Sumo Museum in Katsuragi.



Wrestling ring at the Kehayaza Sumo Museum



www.visitnara.jp

PRODUCED BY NARA PREFECTURE

Address: 30 Noborioji-cho, Nara Prefecture 630-8501, Japan

Phone: +81-742-27-8553