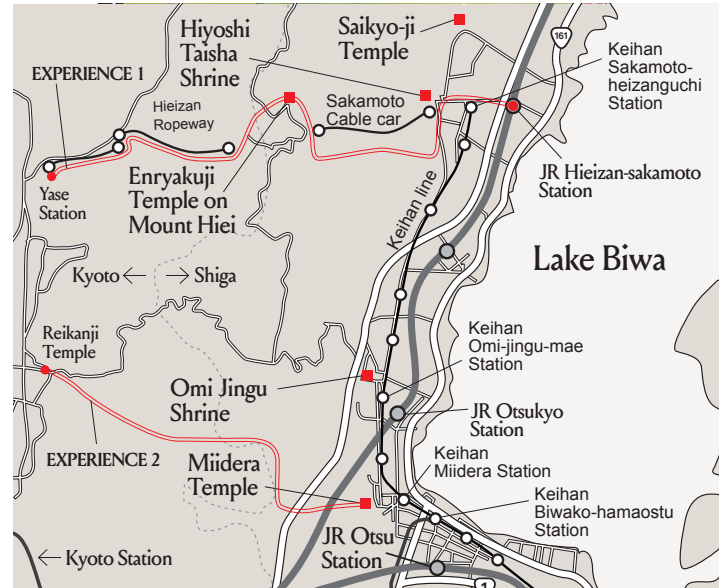


# Map



**Access**  
**By train:** Otsu Station is just nine minutes by train from Kyoto Station, on the JR Biwako Line. The Subway Tozai / Keihan Keishin Line also takes 25 minutes from central Kyoto's Sanjo Station to Otsu's Biwako-Hamaotsu Station. Otsu is around 2.5 hours by train from Tokyo, including transfers at Kyoto Station.  
**By air:** Otsu is one hour 25 minutes from Kansai International Airport and one hour 45 minutes from Chubu International Airport.



Omi Jingu Shrine



Saikyo-ji Temple



Ishiyamadera Temple



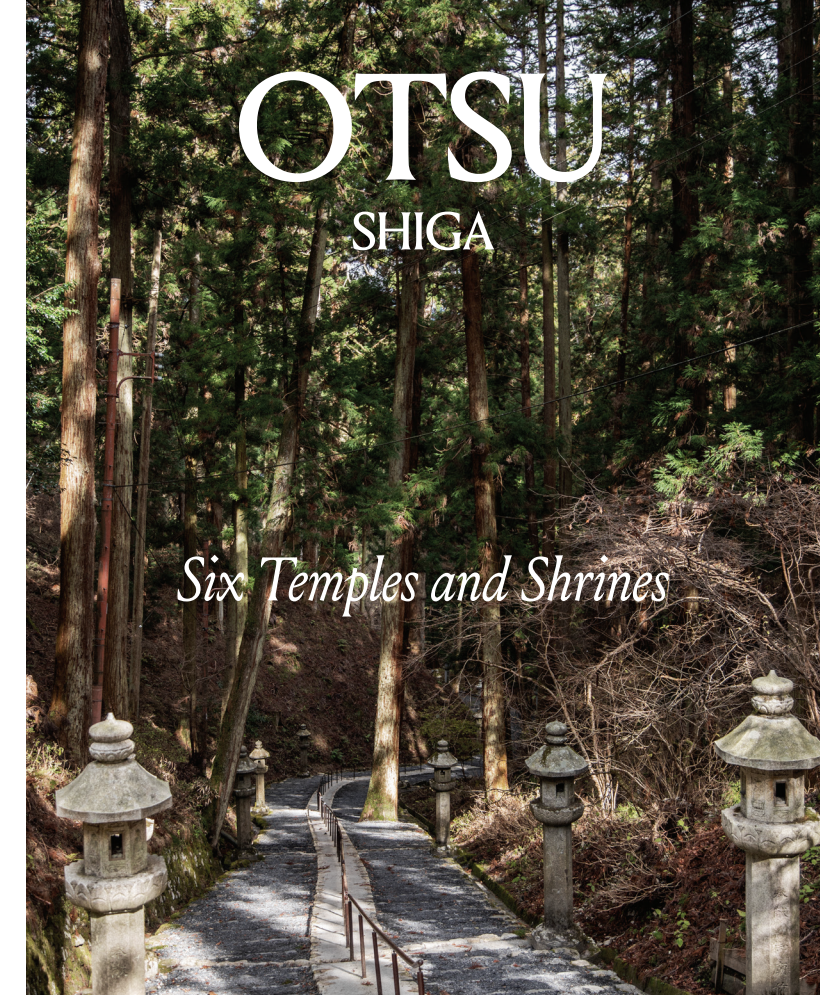
Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine



Miidera Temple



Enryakuji Temple on Mount Hiei



OTSU  
SHIGA

*Six Temples and Shrines*

# All About Otsu

The reflective blue waters of a lake; old pilgrim paths cutting through trees; dramatic tales of warrior monks – plus a string of breathtaking temples and shrines, hidden in sacred mountainside forests.

The list of reasons to visit Otsu is as long as it is varied. The small city fringes the southern shores of Lake Biwa, the nation’s largest freshwater lake, and is home to a cornucopia of culture, history and nature.

And perhaps best of all? Getting to Otsu couldn’t be easier: the city is just nine minutes by train from Kyoto Station and its historical sites are rarely crowded, ensuring a peaceful and authentic experience. Alternatively, visitors can hop on a ferry – it takes less than an hour between Kyoto and Otsu – or even put their walking shoes on and follow trekking routes that link the two cities.

It was more than 1,350 years ago that Otsu first stepped into the spotlight, when Emperor Tenji declared it the capital of Imperial Japan, a status that lasted around five years before wartime conflict forced its relocation to nearby Kyoto.

Today, the legacy of its time as ancient capital still lingers, as reflected in the city’s rich cultural heritage. Centre stage is sacred Mount Hiei, the birthplace of Japanese Buddhism, with

# Enryakuji Temple on Mount Hiei

its exquisite temple complex hidden on forested slopes plus an enduring status, even today, as a world-class seat of Buddhist learning.

Added to the mix are a string of atmospheric temples and shrines scattered among the mountains that cocoon Otsu, many with world-class architecture and treasures, also offering glimpses – through shrine gates and forest openings – of unforgettable views across Lake Biwa.

Deeply in tune with surrounding nature, Otsu evolves with the seasons, making it a year-round destination – whether it is shrouded in silently falling winter snow; cloud-like bursts of springtime cherry blossoms; the lush green vibrancy of summertime; or fiery expanses of autumnal leaves.

Whatever the time of year, Otsu is guaranteed to inspire. A star-studded cast of Japan’s most famous historical figures have been touched by Otsu – among them, the poet Matsuo Basho and the lady-in-waiting novelist Murasaki Shikibu, both deeply inspired by the setting.

And, as any modern-day traveller visiting Otsu will testify, this power to inspire has not waned with the passing of time – and remains just as strong today.



There are few more spiritual sites than Mount Hiei. Long celebrated as the place where Japanese Buddhism came to life, its atmospheric forests house the scattered Hieizan Enryakuji Temple complex, which was founded in the 8th century and remains the HQ of the Tendai Buddhism sect. It’s a temple entwined with its colourful history – from its early armies of fearsome warrior monks and its rigorous ascetic practices to its erudite reputation as a hub of Buddhist learning. Today, the UNESCO World Heritage Site is still home to monks who famously push the boundaries of spiritual and human endurance with a monumental 1,000-day challenge in the quest for enlightenment.

Visitors, however, can relax, with a gentle mix of forest hiking and temple spotting. A good starting point is the main hall which is currently under reconstruction, a process which began in 2016 and is scheduled to last around a decade. But it is still open and worth visiting: climb the temporary stairs for a rare glimpse of intricate upper level craftsmanship. Those keen to delve deeper can try activities ranging from meditation and sutra practice to calligraphy. Or simply sip a matcha latte, a Sanskrit motif expertly created in the froth, while soaking up views of Lake Biwa at The Enryakuji Kaikan cafe.

# Miidera Temple

It’s all about sacred springs and sakura cherry blossoms at Miidera Temple, an expansive complex (one of the four biggest in Japan) at the base of Mount Hiei. The 7th century temple is famed for the spiritual purity of its spring waters, traditionally used to washed newborn emperors-to-be (its name means “Three Wells”) as well as well its haiku-inspiringly perfect scattering of cherry blossoms, which burst into bloom among its winding hillside complex of stone pathways, temple structures and tiered pagodas every spring. It’s also a treasure trove of acclaimed Buddhist artifacts, with an impressive collection of exquisitely crafted Buddhist sculptures in the main Kondo building (one is so sacred, it’s never been seen before by human eyes). Don’t miss the opportunity to strike the large green bell just outside, famed for its beautifully deep resonance. For the ultimate Buddhist experience, visitors can stay overnight in temple lodging, trying Zen meditation and Buddhist bracelet making, or explore the ascetic world of yamabushi mountain monks with remote mountain hikes.



# Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine

Arriving at Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine – with its fairytale-like stone bridges, red torii gates and forested pathways – feels a little like stepping back in time, particularly when there are few other people around. Hiyoshi Taisha, located at the base of sacred Mount Hiei, is the main shrine for more than 3,800 Sanno shrines across the country and has a reputation for warding off evil (due to its inauspicious northeasterly direction). Its presence is woven through centuries of history, with the shrine’s existence first recorded in 8th century records, although it was destroyed and later re-built in the 16th century.

Today, dozens of sacred shrines are scattered across its spacious grounds and it’s famed for its sacred monkeys as well as its 3,000-plus maple trees, which transform the setting into shades of fiery red in late autumn. The shrine is also home to one of Lake Biwa’s most famous festivals – the six-week Sanno Festival, which climaxes in April and dates back more than 1,000 years.



# Ishiyamadera Temple

It was while sitting beneath a full moon, in the scenic confines of Ishiyamadera Temple, that the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu began writing a story – and the iconic Tale of Genji, widely regarded as the world’s first novel, was born. Fast-forward 1,000 years and the setting of the hillside temple, fringed with flowers and forests along the banks of the Seta River, remains no less inspiring. The temple, constructed around 747, has since become something of a Mecca for writers seeking inspiration, as well as more typical Buddhist pilgrims (it’s part of a 33-temple circuit in the Kansai region dedicated to Kannon, the goddess of mercy).

The temple’s beauty is in tune with the seasons – from its wintertime plum blossoms to the irises of early summer. Perhaps best of all? Moon viewings still take place, with stone pathways lit with lanterns leading to views of moonlight reflecting off the still surface of a distant Lake Biwa – a vision celebrated through the centuries in countless works of Japanese art.



# Saikyo-ji Temple

It’s worth looking over your shoulder after stepping into the inner courtyards of the hillside Saikyo-ji Temple – and find yourself rewarded with breathtaking views across Lake Biwa, framed by majestic wooden gates. Saikyo-ji Temple is the picturesque headquarters of the Tendai Shinsei sect of Buddhism, complete with quiet inner gardens, elegant matsu pine trees, exquisite craftsmanship and a rich heritage dating back to the 7th century. The main Hondo hall is a famed example of Japanese temple architecture: constructed in the 18th century, the smooth expanses of Zelkova wood were pieced together without the use of a single nail. Inside is a dreamy Buddhist enclave of golden artifacts and heady incense. Look out for the monkey motifs scattered around the complex, the legacy of a centuries-old tale that claims a monkey used to ring the temple’s bell to warn of incoming attacks.



# Omi Jingu Shrine

With its curved tiled roofs above facades of vermilion and white, Omi Jingu’s striking architecture stands out boldly at the top of a staircase that cuts through the surrounding forest. The elegant shrine, built in the 1940s, is not only a showcase of more contemporary shrine architecture – it’s also dedicated to seventh century Emperor Tenji, whose palace was once on these grounds. He is credited with a raft of innovations, from introducing Japan’s first water clock to inventing a (still used) family registry system. In tribute to this, the grounds in front of the main building showcase several replicas of ancient clocks, while there is also a small clock museum on site plus a Clock Festival held every June. The shrine is also famed as the birthplace of karuta, a centuries-old card game based on 100 poems, which has recently boomed in popularity, thanks to the runaway success of a popular manga comic featuring the game being played at the shrine (visitors can dress up in karuta costumes, watch karuta competitions in action and even pick up a manga T-shirt).



# WALK

## Kyoto → Otsu

EXPERIENCE 1: Enryakuji Temple  
**Walking Meditation**  
*A meditative journey into the mountainous heart of Japanese Buddhism*

EXPERIENCE 2: Miidera Temple  
**Walking Through Time**  
*Living history along a 1000-year-old ancient mountain path*



More information  
<https://otsu.or.jp/walkotsu>

