



NanoRa

KASHIHARA CITY



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1 IMAI-CHO

What is Imai-cho?

Kashihara City, Imai-cho. This town and its traditional houses (machiya) are known for being relatively unchanged since the Edo period. With the temple Shonenji at its center, the town has approximately 500 years of history, and in 2017, it was registered as an Agency for Cultural Affairs Japanese Heritage Site, being a cultural property of the Takenouchi Kaido. In this article, we'll hear from a local resident and discover the charms of this small town in Nara. Join me as we learn about Imai-cho's history and enjoy visiting a slice of ancient Japan!

Café Mutsuki

We begin our walking tour of Imai-cho with a stop at a stylish café. From the outside, it doesn't look too different from the surrounding machiya and has a similarly subdued storefront, but if you look closely, you'll start to notice some cute details. Keen eyes will notice a cat on the store's sign, and a goldfish windchime hanging from the 2nd floor balcony.



Passing through the café's noren curtains, you're greeted by a cozy, serene interior. While it is very chic, it still preserves its essence as a former machiya. Right at the entrance, there are rows of beautiful handmade chopsticks and chopstick rests, plates, as well as other accessories and souvenirs available for purchase.



Café owner Akemi Kobayashi owns and runs the business with her cat, Coco. She responded to an interview about her experiences and Imai-cho.

1. I understand that you live in Imai-cho, so, around how many years have you been living here and running the café? What inspired you to open a café in the first place?

Before the café, I was living in Oyodo-cho, but when I opened the business I moved to Imai-cho, and I've been here 4 years now. I've always enjoyed cooking and worked in a different café before, but at some point along the way I started to have my own ideas and a desire to work in my own style. So, I opened this café soon after.

2. The numbers may be decreasing due to COVID, but do you receive visitors to the café from foreign countries?

The number of foreign visitors was low even before the pandemic. Most who do come have already been to the famous tourist spots in Nara and Kyoto, so they come here in search of even more places to visit.

3. When visitors come to visit from abroad or from other prefectures, is there anything you'd like them to know in particular about Imai-cho?

In the past, in order to protect the town against attacks, Imai-cho's roads and paths were intentionally designed to be confusing to navigate, and I think that's one charming feature of the town. Visitors may get lost along their way, but that's one of the things that makes this place so great. I would like visitors to get lost and enjoy the discoveries they make along the way during their exploration of Imai-cho.

After the interview, I enjoyed a delicious Café Mutsuki-exclusive Japanese style tiramisu. Inside the popular "Mutsuki Tiramisu", there are several layers consisting of cream cheese, red bean, matcha yokan (a type of Japanese dessert made from agar), and dried persimmons. To top it all off, there's the symbol of Imai-cho (the koma tsunagi, or iron horse tie ring) rendered in cocoa powder. The dessert is elegantly presented inside of a handmade wooden box, crafted locally by Kobayashi's stepbrother and made from the wood of Nara cedar trees.



Why not enjoy a tiramisu while taking a trip back in time to a traditional Edo period machiya? I recommend starting your Imai-cho journey here at Café Mutsuki.

Machinami Koryu Center "Hanairaka" (Flower Tiled Roof)

After relaxing at the café, it was time to head to the Machinami Koryu Center "Hanairaka" to learn more about the history of Imai-cho. Built in the Meiji period, the outside of Hanairaka is statuesque and imposing. I felt that I'd shrunk in size like Lewis Carroll's Alice standing before it!



Once inside, Mr. Masuda Takayuki from the Kashihara City Tourism Association and tour guide Chieko Kato directed me to the diorama room on the right. The instant I saw the diorama, I felt, in contrast to the feeling I'd had outside the imposing façade of Hanairaka, that I'd now instead grown in size to that of a giant (again like Alice) and could look down from the sky on the town of Imai-cho below. While gazing down on the tiny town, my tour guide began to explain Imai-cho's rich history.



According to Ms. Kato, Imai-cho was considered a possession of Kofukuji Temple. While its residents did grow rice, cotton was also an important crop for them.

In ancient times entering into the Muromachi period, followers began to gather around the temple of Shonenji due to the spread of Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdō Shinshū) in Japan, so a town with Shonenji at its center was developed. Since the temple was the town's focus, it was decided that trade and commerce could be conducted freely within the town limits. Thus, in the Edo period, Imai-cho became very wealthy. It is thought that the original owners of the machiya we explore next (the Former Kometani Family Residence) were also a wealthy family.

Traveling back in time was a great way to spend an afternoon here in Imai-cho. If you get the chance to visit, I recommend coming to Hanairaka and checking out the beautiful town diorama to plan where you'll go next on your journey.

Former Kometani Family Residence

The final stop on our tour of Imai-cho is a traditional Japanese home, the Former Kometani Family Residence. Built in the mid-18th century, the interior of this machiya has quite a few unique characteristics.

Stepping over the threshold and entering the home, your eyes are first greeted by a sweeping foyer with a dirt floor (doma) typical of machiya. As the ceiling is extremely tall, it felt more like a warehouse than a former family residence.

Proceeding to the outside balcony, you'll find a beautiful well, which, according to our guide, is a sign that the Kometani family was potentially very wealthy. They could draw water freely from this well without having to use the public wells in town.



Returning to the doma inside, a few characteristics stuck out to me. First was the odd number of kamado, or traditional stoves. While ordinarily one might expect to find 2 kamado, in this residence there are 5 total, and their shape is curved like that of a Japanese magatama, a comma-shaped bead from ancient Japan. For this reason, this type of stove is called a magatama-style kamado, and it's designed to be easy to use due to its curvature. According to the tour guide, this allowed for the cook to easily adjust the intensity of the flames while cooking, and the large number of stoves meant that each stove could have a different side or main dish cooking at once.

Further to the right of the kamado, there is a wooden ladder. I was curious before coming to Imai-cho and had researched what the loft space this ladder leads to was used for, but I could only find that it had once been used as a sleeping place. One mystery remained: who had slept here? By coming to Imai-cho and asking my tour guide, I was able to learn that the space was used by the former apprentices of the Kometani owner, and, to prevent them from running away, this ladder was removed each night. I began to wonder about the lives of these apprentices who had worked under the strict Kometani owner.

Finally, as one last piece in the puzzle of the Kometani Family Residence, there was the shimomise, a space where customers could store their belongings. From this final hint, I discovered that the Former Kometani Residence had not only been a family home, but also a business. As for what kind, remaining records suggest that the family dealt in ironware, in particular farming equipment. With this piece in place, I felt I'd finally unraveled the mystery of the people who'd lived here so many years ago.

Turning again to look at the expansive doma, I felt that I could almost hear the clanging of iron, hear the sound of the Kometani owner laughing amicably with his regular customers, hear the bubbling of the kamado and smell the dashi soup inside, and hear the creaking of the ladder as an apprentice climbed down to begin his day; all of the many sounds and smells of daily life at the Former Kometani Residence seemed to fill the room. By the time I stepped outside, it was already 4pm. After thanking my tour guide, I looked back at the house. It stood regally with the almost-setting sun as its backdrop. The people walking around Imai-cho at this hour are mostly locals exchanging greetings with their neighbors. Inside their machiya, there are most certainly appliances such as air conditioners and televisions, among other modern conveniences. And yet, as I remember the smiling faces of Ms. Kobayashi from Café Mutsuki and my two tour guides, and the openness with which they shared their stories of Imai-cho with me, I felt that one thing had not changed over hundreds of years here: the friendliness and spirit of omotenashi held by its people.

As I headed back to the station, I thought to myself that I couldn't wait to come back again someday.

Samantha Johnson

3 KASHIHARA-JINGU SHRINE



Kashihara-jingu Shrine

Kashihara-jingu is a famous Shinto shrine situated in Kashihara City, and its main deities are Emperor Jinmu and Empress Himetataraisuzu-hime. According to the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki, two ancient texts recording Japanese myths and history, Emperor Jinmu was the first Emperor in Japanese history, whose reign started in 660 BCE.

The shrine is placed in the spot where Jinmu's palace was built according to legend. It is built in an architectural style called "shiraki-zukuri": the wood is used showing its natural texture, without covering it with lacquer, and the roofs are made of cypress bark. This simple, and yet very elegant style goes perfectly with the forest nearby.

When you arrive at the central road, you are first struck by the great 10 meter (32 feet) torii gate. There are rows of oak on both sides. "Oak" in Japanese is "kashi", this is of course the "kashi" in "Kashihara"! Following the road, you arrive to the Southern Divine Gate. Passing through this gate, you arrive at a big square which is the main precinct of the shrine. There, you can find the outer worship hall.



What catches the eyes in this worship hall is the big votive plaque. This is called an "ema", and you can find it easily in every Shinto shrine. But this one is rather big! It represents this year's Chinese zodiac deity, which in this year (2022) is the Tiger. According to the Shrine, this giant ema was first displayed in 1960 to celebrate the birth of the Emperor of Japan. Its height is 4.5 meters (15 ft), and its width is 5.4 meters (18 ft). This is very impressive!



One peculiarity of the shrine is that it has not one, but two worship halls: the outer hall is where most people go to pray, whereas the inner hall is only used for some specific ceremonies.

The Legend of Jinmu

As we said before, Jinmu is a legendary character appearing in Japanese myths. I would like to share his story with you. The Kojiki and Nihon Shoki say that he is the great-great-grandchild of the goddess of the sun, Amaterasu. He was born in 711 BCE in Kyushu, in what is now Miyazaki Prefecture. At the age of 45, he decided to leave Kyushu to go to Yamato (today known as Nara Prefecture).

But the trip was not easy. Along the way, he met a certain Nagasunehiko who defeated him. But after the defeat, he understood that the reason why he lost was because he fought facing the sun, despite being the descendent of the Sun. So, he decided to skirt the Kii Peninsula to enter Yamato from the other side so he would have the sun on his back supporting him.

He confronted Nagasunehiko again, and this time, during the battle, a radiant kite bird appeared and landed on Jinmu's bow. All his enemies were in awe, and so they surrendered. After this, he finally arrived in Yamato, and ruled from his Palace in Kashihara at the foot of Mont Unebi. By the way, the staff of the shrine told us that Emperor Jinmu can grant you luck and longevity. Luck, because Jinmu was indeed very lucky to overcome his enemies and become the first Emperor of Japan, and longevity because the texts tell us that he lived until he was 127 years old!



Treasure Hall
(Photo credit: Kashihara Shrine)

Omikuji

Look at these omikuji. Aren't they cute? You might be wondering what an omikuji is. This is a fortune slip you usually get in Shinto shrines. But here, in addition to the usual strip of paper, you can also receive one of two cute animal figures: a golden kite or a silver ayu fish. We already spoke about the kite, but what's this fish? The Shrine staff explained to us the meaning behind the fish. One day, Jinmu made a divination to determine whether he would be victorious on the battlefield or not. To do so, he went to Niu river (in an area now known as Higashi-Yoshino), and said "I shall sink a bottle of rice wine in this river. If fish appear, I will be victorious at the battle for Yamato". When he sank the bottle, a big drunk fish appeared, which was a good omen. In Japanese, "ayu" is written with the character 鮎, which combines the character for fish (魚) and prediction (占). As a result, the ayu fish is associated with Jinmu's legend. If you ever visit Kashihara-jingu Shrine, I definitely recommend trying one of these omikuji.



Kashihara-jingu is a charming shrine that exists in harmony with nature. I definitely recommend making a visit! If you're interested in Jinmu's myth, why not visit the Treasure Hall on the shrine grounds?



many legends and stories surrounding its creation, a few of which I will introduce here.

The Legend of the Kume Mountain Hermit

Kumadera Temple appears often in classic literature. For example, in Washuu Kumadera Ruki, it is written that Prince Shotoku's brother Kumenomiko built Kumadera Temple in an effort to cure himself of an eye disease. For this reason, the temple's principal deity Yakushi Nyorai is thought to be able to cure illnesses of the eyes.

However, the oldest and most famous of these creation legends is the Legend of the Kume Mountain Hermit. In story collections such as Konjaku Monogatari and Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness), the flying Kume mountain hermit is said to have created the temple. As it is an amusing story, I have retold it below.

The Kume hermit was born in the time of Emperor Kinmei. After undergoing rigorous training at the peak of Dragon's Gate located at the foot of Mount Yoshino, he gained the ability to fly.

One day, while flying in the sky, he stumbled upon a beautiful maiden bathing in a river. When he saw her calves, he lost his flying ability and fell from the sky. After that, he married the maiden and lived his life as an ordinary person. However, when Emperor Shoumu wanted to construct the Great Buddha Hall in Todaiji, the Kume hermit miraculously regained his ability, using it to help gather wood and stone from around the country and fly it back to the Great Buddha Hall. As a show of gratitude for this feat, Emperor Shoumu gave the Kume hermit his own domain, and it is here that Kumadera Temple was built.

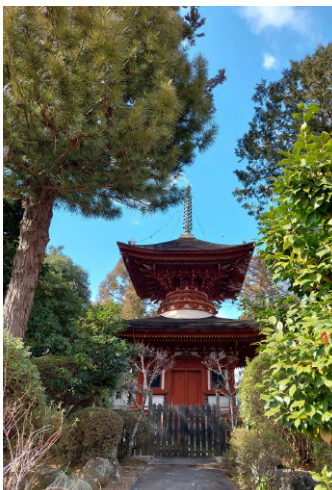
This legend is very popular, so there is also a statue of the Kume mountain hermit to the left of the main hall at Kumadera Temple. There are also ema, or votive plaques, which feature images of the legend which you can buy at the temple.



What is Kumadera Temple?

Kumadera Temple is a quiet temple situated in Kashiwara City that offers a relaxing temple visit experience. It is also a place that boasts interesting legends and history.

It is a Buddhist temple of the Shingon sect. Among the buildings found in the temple grounds, the main hall and Tahoutou (literally "many-jewelled") pagoda are perhaps the most important. The main hall of today was constructed in 1663, and the principal deity of the temple is Yakushi Nyorai.



The Tahōtō pagoda was transferred to its current location from Ninnaji Temple in Kyoto in 1659, and because you can see the influence of Zen Buddhism in its architecture, it has been designated as an important cultural property. By the way, do you know what a Tahōtō style pagoda is? To put it simply, it is a form of Buddhist structure found in Esoteric (Shingon and Tendai sect) Buddhist temples.

The beauty of this place is not limited to its architecture, as it also features a beautiful garden. There are many kinds of flowers and plants here, so you can enjoy the view with the changing of the seasons. The hydrangeas are particularly popular, so I recommend visiting in June.

The Origins of Kumadera Temple

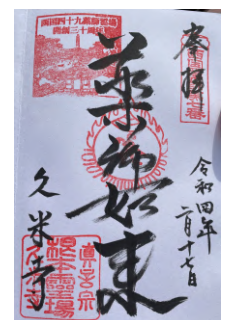
There are many explanations for why and how the temple came to be. Based on a roof tile discovered in prior excavation, it can be said that its construction dates back all the way to the Hakuho period (from the late 7th to early 8th century). Also, one explanation for the name of the temple is that it comes from a warrior clan called the Kume clan.

The history of Kumadera Temple is quite old, so there are



Goshuin

This is the seal stamp or goshuin which visitors can receive at Kumadera Temple. Do you know what a goshuin is? At shrines and temples in Japan, if you pay a donation in the amount determined by the temple, you can have proof of this written in your goshuin book. Since it is not the same as a stamp rally, it is important to pray at the temple prior to receiving the goshuin.



On the goshuin of Kumadera Temple, you can find the name of the main deity Yakushi Nyorai written in Japanese kanji as well as Sanskrit. When you visit Kumadera Temple, why not try receiving a goshuin?

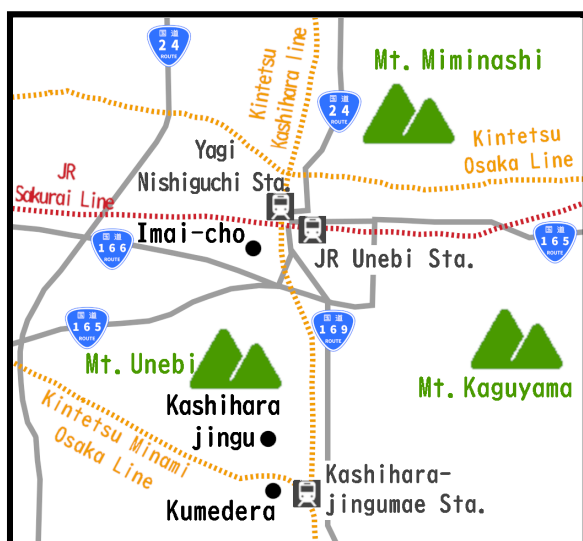
Editor's Note

What is "NanoRa"?

"NanoRa" is made up of articles about places in the prefecture that we, as foreign residents ourselves, visited and thought would be of interest to both visitors from overseas and the local Nara community.

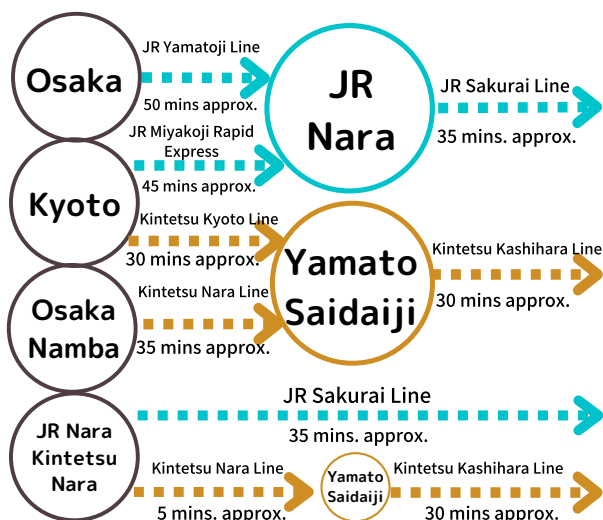
We hope it will be of some interest and serve to help everyone discover the charm that Nara holds.

Area Map



Access

By train



Kashihara City

By car

From Osaka : Approx. 50 minutes
 From Kyoto : Approx. 1 hour 30 minutes
 From Nara : Approx. 20 minutes } to Kashihara



Samantha Johnson



As explored in this issue, Kashihara is a city with a long history. In its historic district of Imai-cho, you can find Japanese machiya, old homes similar to those found in the Naramachi district of Nara City. Since one of my hobbies is cafe-hopping, I chose to visit Cafe Mutsuki in Imai-cho for my article. To learn more of the history, I also paid a visit to the Machinami Koryu Center "Hanairaka" and the Former Kometani Family Residence.

I highly recommend Imai-cho to NanoRa readers as a unique travel destination in Nara Prefecture!

Guilhem Laude



Kashihara City is located to the south of the Nara Basin, and was the center of ancient Japan. I recommend it to all Japan history buffs! In addition to the places featured in this issue, Kashihara is home to the Fujiwara Palace Ruins, among other ancient ruins.

When researching for the article, I met a very cute cat! I thought he could be the town's guardian. Why not take a stroll through this historic city?

Special Thanks

In this issue, we would like to sincerely thank the staff of Cafe Mutsuki, the Machinami Koryu Center "Hanairaka", Former Kometani Residence, Kashihara-Jinguu Shrine, and Kumedera Temple for their cooperation.

NanoRa

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