



Aerial view of Mikimoto Pearl Island in Mie Prefecture

# Mikimoto Pearl Museum

*Julian Ryall visits Mikimoto Pearl Island in Toba, Mie Prefecture, where more than a century ago Kokichi Mikimoto became the first man in the world to culture the coveted pearl oyster.*

Kiyoo Matsuzuki does not agree with the old adage about a girl's best friend. For him, the incomparable pearl is the most beautiful jewel that a woman could wear.

"Pearls are the only gem that is already perfect when we see them for the first time," says Matsuzuki, the director and curator of the Pearl Museum, on Mikimoto Pearl Island in Mie Prefecture. "With diamonds, rubies or sapphires, they need to be cut and polished to get the most out of them. But a pearl is beautiful from the first moment that you see it."

Matsuzuki oversees the large museum that is dedicated to the pearl on the small island that lies about 70 yards off the town of Toba where the "Pearl King" Kokichi Mikimoto succeeded in culturing the very first pearl oyster in 1893.

In the late 1920s, the island was opened only for a limited number of guests. That changed in 1951 and the 48 million visitors since have included queens, princes, heads of state and captains of industry, all attracted by these beautiful translucent spheres.

The ground floor of the museum has exhibits that detail how pearls are cultured. There are some 100,000 different varieties of oyster, although only six are suitable for culturing pearls. The pearlers of Japan generally use Akoya oysters, with the black-lipped oysters of Tahiti producing the black pearl and larger white-lipped oysters creating the large South Sea pearl.

To create a pearl, a wedge is inserted into the mouth of the shell and a mantle of clear membrane placed alongside the round nuclei, made of polished mussel shell, that will eventually be coated in mother-of-pearl.

The exhibition shows how a mere 5% of the oysters that are harvested have the best quality pearls, while as many as 50% die. Imperfect pearls are used in medical supplements and cosmetics.

The museum also shows how the pearls are selected to be strung onto lengths of silk thread, with



This Pearl Crown was made in 1978 to commemorate the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of cultured pearls. The Crown is made of 18 carat gold studded with 872 lustrous Mikimoto cultured pearls.

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## Access and Admission

**Address:** Mikimoto Pearl Island, 1-7-1 Toba City, Mie Prefecture, Japan

**Tel/Fax:** +81 (0)599-25-2028/+81 (0)599-25-2655

**Website:** [www.mikimoto-pearl-museum.co.jp/en/index.html](http://www.mikimoto-pearl-museum.co.jp/en/index.html)

**Opening Hours:** January to March and month of November, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. April to October, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. December, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

**Tickets:** Adults (16+), ¥1,500; children (7–15), ¥750

the stringers required to have a good eye to match pearls of similar luster, color and size. The downstairs area also has an extensive collection of photos related to the pearl industry from around the world, including images of the famous women *ama* divers of Mie Prefecture.

On the upper level of the museum, visitors can admire the works of art that pearls can become. Matsuzuki and his colleagues began gathering ex-



Visitors to Mikimoto Pearl Island can watch the *ama* pearl divers at work from close quarters.

amples of fine jewelry that make use of pearls in 1985 and have built up a collection of around 250 items.

They include a 1 BC earring of gold with three pearls, Roman jewelry, blue pearls set into Byzantine earrings and an exquisite French pendant of circa 1600 of a cross with inlaid pearls. Another example,

from around the same time but made in Spain, is of a golden lion with feet made of pearls. The collection also includes English lockets, brooches from Canada and Scotland, and an Iranian mat with pearls from the early nineteenth century.



On display at the Mikimoto Pearl Museum, this "yaguruma" (wheel of arrows) sash clip was first exhibited at the World Exposition in Paris in 1937. The clip is set with twenty pearls of 3.5 mm–4 mm and one pearl of 8.75 mm in the center, along with diamonds, sapphires and emeralds.

The artisans of Mikimoto have also created a number of breathtaking larger works of art, including a scale replica of an ancient temple in Nara that has 12,760 pearls, a crown based on a Byzantine crown from the Middle Ages that took fourteen months to make and has 796 top-quality pearls and 17 diamonds, and a replica of the Liberty Bell that was displayed in New York and uses 12,250 pearls and 366 diamonds.

Elsewhere on the island is the Kokichi Memorial Hall, which tells visitors of the life and times of Mikimoto, who died in 1954 at the age of ninety-six. There is also a large statue to the founder of the company, a shop with an extensive selection of pearl products and a place where visitors can watch a demonstration by the *ama* women divers, dressed in the traditional white robes of the profession. 

*Julian Ryall is the Japan correspondent for the Daily Telegraph and freelances for publications around the world.*