

JAPAN'S WORLD HERITAGE SITES: A FEEL ALL THEIR OWN



INTERVIEW WITH COMMISSIONER FOR
CULTURAL AFFAIRS

MASANORI AOYAGI

KATSUMI YASUKURA

THE sites of Japan's Meiji industrial revolution were recently added to the list of World Heritage Sites, bringing Japan's total to nineteen. We spoke with Commissioner for Cultural Affairs Masanori Aoyagi, an art historian and former director general of the National Museum of Western Art, to learn about the rich and varied charms of these destinations and how Japan's singular culture and climate brought them about.

What are the unique features of Japanese World Heritage Sites?

The UNESCO World Heritage Site system was originally devised with the protection of monuments of the Western world—such as vast palaces or cathedrals—in mind. By contrast, most of Japan's cultural assets are small in scale and of wooden construction. At first glance, these seem frail and flimsy compared to their Western equivalents, but the way they have been designed to reduce environmental impact and are built to coexist with nature is of an

exceedingly high standard seen nowhere else in the world.

For instance, at Horyu-ji temple in Nara, they have over time removed selected sections of the building that have rotted away and repaired them with new lumber. This process has continued up to today, bringing the edifice into the present and leading to its selection as a World Heritage Site. Something that can be said of all traditional Japanese wooden architecture in general is the way it incorporates the idea of using lumber from trees growing on the southern side for the building's south side and from the north side of the plot for the building's north side. This concept came out of the understanding that using lumber close to its point of origin achieves maximum resilience. This use of materials is born out of a Japanese philosophy of design, and is one of the elements that make Japan's World Heritage Sites unique. We actively want to share this background and story of the design and ethos of Japanese architecture with the growing numbers of visitors to Japan.

A feature of Japan's World Natural Heritage Sites is their sheer diversity. While Japan may seem like a small island nation when seen from abroad, it stretches three thousand kilometers north and south, with 68 percent of the country covered in greenery. This means we have four rich, distinctive seasons and an abundance of nature. This special climate created conditions for such varied sites as Shiretoko, Shirakami-Sanchi, the Ogasawara Islands, and Yakushima Island.

Of the sites you have visited yourself, which are the most memorable?

One would be Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and Its Cultural Landscape in Shimane Prefecture. This mine produced a vast amount of silver during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, almost twenty percent of the world total. However, the mine was dug with techniques that preserved the original form of the mountain. This site is a testament to Japan's unique ethos of living in tandem with nature.

The second is Hiraizumi: Temples, Gardens and Archaeological Sites Representing the Buddhist Pure Land. This was built in the twelfth century in Iwate Prefecture. In that far northeastern region removed from central Japan, there are temples and gardens that rival those seen in Japan's old capitals, an architectural feat that speaks to the spread of a stable, uniform cultural style to all parts of Japan.

Please tell us about planned World Heritage Sites in Japan and their particular appeal.

One is Churches and Christian Sites in Nagasaki. Over a period of about four centuries—spanning a time when Christianity was both propagated and later forbidden—the unique architecture and traditions of this community developed a style of church that meshed with the undulating landscape of Nagasaki, creating unique vistas that are of extremely important cultural value. We expect to receive a decision on this site in the summer of 2016.

One of our candidates for 2017 is Okinoshima Island and Related Sites in the Munakata Region, which we submitted in July this year. Of these, the site drawing the most attention is Okinoshima Island itself, which is located at a point about equidistant from Kyushu and Tsushima Island. From the fourth to ninth centuries AD, Okinoshima was the site of religious rituals designed to appeal for the safety and mutual success of exchanges with the mainland. In addition to the nearly eighty thousand artifacts uncovered here—nearly all of which are classed as National Treasures—this rare island site is also home to an accretion of deep religious sentiment and the history it has in turn created, such as the prohibition of women and restrictions on visitors to the island, which still remain in place today.

All of these sites developed over long stretches of time and through the handing down of Japan's traditions. They grew in tandem with nature. In this way, they are heritage sites that are uniquely Japanese. 