

Yamadera

A place where you feel a wonderful peace penetrate your heart

Edited by Yamadera Junior High School

1 Rishakuji Temple

Yamadera, literally “mountain temple”, is a general term for the temples and shrines scattered along the Yamadera mountainside. The official name of Yamadera is Hojusan Rishshakuji, which may be translated as “Rishshakuji Temple on Mt. Hoju”.

This temple was founded in A.D. 860 by Jikaku Daishi, an important Buddhist priest of the 9th century, in response to an imperial edict issued by Emperor Seiwa during the Heian era. Rishshakuji Temple belongs to the Tendai sect, one of the main sects of Buddhism, and the Yamadera mountain complex is located on a tree-covered hillside on the northeastern side of Yamagata City.

The haiku poet and traveller Matsuo Basho journeyed to Yamadera when one of his disciples urged him to visit the area to experience its supreme quietness, and the 1015 stone steps Basho climbed in the Edo period continue to lead visitors up to Okuno-in, the famous innermost temple. Yamadera has become a popular tourist destination, and many tourists visit Yamadera all year round. However, in the wintertime visitors will find Yamadera shrouded in a deep quietness, as silent as the time of Basho’s visit.

1) Konponchudo Temple

The main Konponchudo Temple is a beech wood structure that is the oldest building in the Yamadera mountain complex and has been designated an important cultural property of Japan. An “eternal flame” brought from Enryakuji Temple, the mother temple of the Tendai sect, continues to burn on its altar. Priests add rapeseed oil every day to this flame, which has been burning for the 1100 years since the establishment of Rishshakuji Temple.



2) Hie Shrine

Hie Shrine was established to house a guardian god for Rishshakuji Temple. The temple was officially designated Hie Shrine in the Meiji era, in response to a policy separating temples from shrines. A festival called the Sanno Festival, famous for its kenka mikoshi – or “fighting portable shrines” – is held on May 17 each year, and when not in use, these portable shrines are stored in Hie Shrine.

3) Statues of Basho and Sora

Matsuo Basho is one of Japan’s most famous poets, and Sora was his disciple. Basho established the genre of haiku, Japan’s most well-known poetic form.

Basho and Sora visited Yamadera during their famous

journey documented in Basho’s travel journal *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Basho originally had no plans to visit Yamadera, but when he stayed with his disciple Seifu in the Obanazawa region of Yamagata, the disciple spoke highly of the heavenly quietness of Rishshakuji Temple and encouraged Basho to visit. As a result, Basho changed his schedule to include a visit to Yamadera, where he composed the famous “*cicada haiku*” that was translated by the scholar Donald Keene as follows:



such stillness – / the cries of the cicadas / sink into the rocks

There is a famous story about a debate between Mokichi Saito, a celebrated *tanka* poet from Yamagata, and the scholar Toyotaka Komiya over the species of cicadas that Basho heard in Yamadera. The disagreement concerned whether the cicadas in question were the large brown cicada, or a smaller cicada known as the *nini-zemi* in Japanese. Based on the season that Basho visited Yamadera, the consensus is that the cicadas were most likely *nini-zemi* cicadas, but some locals continue to insist that Basho must have heard the cries of *higurashi*, or “*evening cicadas*,” because it is these cicadas that sing when Yamadera is shrouded in the deepest silence of dusk. Moreover, the plaintive singing of evening cicadas is thought to most aptly fit the atmosphere of Basho’s *haiku* poem.



In addition to being an evocative depiction of the solemn quietness which this sacred area is known for, *the cicada haiku* is also regarded as one of the best haiku poems in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which explains why novice haiku poets from throughout Japan visit Yamadera in search of inspiration. To commemorate Basho’s visit to Yamadera and his *cicada haiku*, statues of Basho and Sora, in addition to a monument inscribed with Basho’s haiku, were erected by volunteers in 1989.

It is known that Basho stayed in one of three lodgings for pilgrims located near Rishshakuji Temple during his visit. Unfortunately, two of the buildings were subsequently destroyed by fire while the third was relocated, and the lack of written records makes it impossible to definitively identify his specific place of lodging.

4) Nenbutsudo (Prayer Hall)

A statue of the Amida Buddha is enshrined within the Nenbutsudo Prayer Hall. This statue is believed to have healing powers, and it is said that touching the statue can help pain or disease to disappear.

At the entrance of the temple a huge strand of juzu prayer beads is hung from the ceiling. It has 365 beads, corresponding to the number of days in a year. It is