

# Nara: 'Tis Cherry Blossom Season!



The ancient city of Nara in the Kinki region is less than an hour away from both Osaka and Kyoto. A past capital, there are many precious historical buildings in this area. Indeed, Nara is said to have the highest number of buildings designated as national treasures in Japan. At the same time, the natural environment is colorful too. Although there is no ocean, many steep

mountains tower over the region's central and southern parts, with numerous temples and shrines sitting quietly among them. Come spring, Mount Yoshino, which is representative of Nara and is designated as part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is awash in cherry blossoms, and many people flock to see them.

In 2021 I visited Nara just when the news was reporting that Mount Yoshino's sakura were in full blossom.



## 1. Mount Yoshino

**Video:** <https://youtu.be/S3pMna5TYs0>

About a 90-minute drive from the center of Nara City, after following a hilly area for a while, a mountain dyed in the color of cherry blossoms came into view. There are said to



be 30,000 cherry trees here planted in the Heian period (794–1185), and just as I had heard, the sight was splendid. In early April the blossoms open up in order, starting at the foot of the mountain. In particular, the highlight is a breathtaking area called Kamisenbon (literally, Upper 1,000 Trees), which is said to be the very best place in Japan for viewing cherry blossoms. On that day there were many sightseers standing in awe at the sight of Japan’s sakura.



## 2. Tanzan Shrine

Video: <https://youtu.be/3sS--Srdffo>

Descending Mount Yoshino and driving for about 30 minutes, I came to Tanzan Shrine, which was built about 1,400 years ago and is another popular sakura spot. The shrine’s name is thought to come from the fact that discussion of the Taika Reform (a series of reforms from 645 to 649) took place here. (In Japanese, “Tanzan” means “mountain of discussion.”)

Tanzan Shrine is well known for being dedicated to Fujiwara no Kamatari (614–669), a politician of the Asuka period (593–710).

The shrine’s







13-story pagoda, which stands at a high point in the sloping grounds, is beautiful. And the Usuzumi Zakura cherry tree, which stands alongside the pagoda and is said to be 600 years old, is a must-see.

### 3. Ishibutai Tomb

Video: [https://youtu.be/J68FqaR0\\_cU](https://youtu.be/J68FqaR0_cU)



Further to the north I came to the village of Asuka, which is known as the spiritual hometown of the Japanese. Many historical remains dating back to the Asuka period have been unearthed in this village, which in the past used to share the same kanji as the era name. The Ishibutai Tomb

is designated as a special historical site; one leading theory is that Soga no Umako (?–626), a politician of the Asuka period, is buried here. The tumulus consists of piles of huge stones. It is strange to think that a thousand and several hundred years ago it was possible to manually build such a structure. The cherry trees surrounding the tomb were in blossom, and many families and others were enjoying picnics in the vicinity.



## 4. Muroji Temple

Video: <https://youtu.be/aPZP6HhZXPw>

Muroji temple is situated in the eastern mountainous area of Nara Prefecture. Muro is the geographical name of the district where monks used to escape from the mundane world and practice ascetism. While Mount Koya, also of the Shingon Sect, prohibited women from entering, Muroji allowed women to worship there as early as the Edo period (1603–1868). That is the reason why the temple is nicknamed “The Women’s Mount Koya” (*nyonin* Koya). The Kondo main hall, which is a national treasure, has a solemn atmosphere. Beyond its roof, I could see the beautiful cherry trees swaying in the breeze.



## 5. Chogakuji Temple

Video: <https://youtu.be/nRhGT9YCW6g>

Chogakuji, again a temple of the Shingon Sect, was built in the ninth century. When I entered through the Daimon main gate, the pond-centered landscape garden and cherry trees were beautiful. The azaleas, which blossom in May, are wonderful, and the Hirado azaleas at this temple, about 1,000 of them, are famous. You can enjoy admiring the



cherry blossoms while strolling around the pond. Chogakuji's masterpiece painting of hell is open to the public only in the autumn of every year; its size and elaborateness are without parallel.



## 6. Horyuji Temple

Video: <https://youtu.be/F9NL9auzVM8>



Located in the town of Ikaruga, in the western part of Nara Prefecture, Horyuji temple has close associations with Prince Shotoku (574–622), and it has extant structures that are the oldest wooden buildings in the world. Horyuji was built in the seventh century. Cherry trees have been planted as if to surround the complex of buildings; they really do



illuminate the precincts of about 180,000 square meters.

## 7. Todaiji Temple

Video: <https://youtu.be/vz6t9RQxP0g>



Todaiji temple is said to have been erected in the Nara period (710–794) as a national project on the orders of Emperor Shomu (701–756). As suggested by these illustrious origins, its presence and dignified atmosphere are overwhelming. In particular, at the center of it all, the Great Buddha Hall is awesome and visited by many people. As the name suggests, this hall houses a statue called the Great Buddha of Nara, an image representing the Buddha Birushana, regarded by some as the central Buddha. The statue seems to keep a watchful eye over visitors, who also enjoy the cherry trees planted in the vicinity.

## 8. Nara Park

Video: <https://youtu.be/0MoCAvheJOO>

The park immediately adjacent to Todaiji is Nara Park, which is famous for its free-roaming deer. The official name for the entire space, including Todaiji, is “Nara Prefectural Municipal Park, Nara Park.” The green grass and cherry blossoms are beautiful. There are said to be about 1,300 deer in the park. Regarded as messengers of the gods, they are carefully protected. The picture of tame deer and cherry blossoms is most soothing.



### **Postscript**

I followed the cherry blossoms of Nara northward from Mount Yoshino in the center of the prefecture. Nara does not cry out that it was an ancient capital, like Kyoto, and does not have the hustle and bustle of Osaka, but my trip to photograph the cherry blossoms made me somehow aware of the weight of its history and gracefulness of an ancient capital. Nara is known for the beauty of its autumn foliage as well. The splendid cherry blossoms and ancient city ambience go very well together, but the autumn colors surely create an atmosphere befitting an old city too. As I left Nara, I told myself that I should definitely come again in the fall.

**Photos and text: Arata Matsumoto, Sharata and Advise, Inc. (<http://www.sharata.net/>)  
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