



Japan has many treasures it is proud to present to the world. To preserve and polish these “treasures”—areas that are rich in historical attractions—the Agency for Cultural Affairs has begun a project to designate them as “Japan Heritage” sites for the stories they tell about Japanese culture and traditions. The Japan Heritage project was set up to promote such special attractions to the rest of Japan and the world. Shiga Prefecture and six cities* applied for recognition of “Lake Biwa and Waterside Scenes—A Heritage of Water in Living and Prayer,” and it was designated a “Japan Heritage” site in 2015.

* Otsu City, Hikone City, Omihachiman City, Takashima City, Higashiomi City, Maibara City

Lake Biwa and Waterside Scenes

A Heritage of Water in Living and Prayer

Natural spring water is revered for its ability to eliminate impurities and heal illness. With the spread of Buddhism in Japan, people came to believe widely in the Buddha of the “Pure Land of Water”—a deity that shines a color of lapis lazuli (blue)—also known as the Medicine Buddha, or Yakushi Nyōrai. In Shiga Prefecture, many temples and shrines were built overlooking “Lake Biwa”, which represents this “Pure Land of Water”, and still today, people from all walks of life are drawn to the area.

For centuries as people built waterways to channel the water running down from the mountains and used the spring water, they have observed a rule to not dirty the water, a rule handed down to the present day. In the lakeside communities and on the island in the lake, unique forms of culinary culture developed, which includes funa-zushi, a fermented form of sushi, as well as traditional fishing methods such as Eri trap fishing. The wetlands and waterside environment that provide a home to many wild creatures have been represented in many works of art and gardens, and in recent years people have been drawn to the cultural landscape that demonstrates how special uses of water became integrated into people’s lives. The long history of the Japanese people’s special “culture of water” is concentrated here in Shiga.

Japan Heritage “Water Culture” Tourism Promotion Council
Shiga Prefecture, Otsu City, Hikone City, Omihachiman City, Takashima City, Higashiomi City, Maibara City
Biwako Visitors Bureau
Shiga Prefectural Association for Cultural Heritages



Japan Heritage “Water Culture” Tourism Promotion Council Secretariat (within the Tourism and International Exchange Bureau, Department of Commerce, Industry, Tourism, and Labor, Shiga Prefecture)
Tel: 077-528-3741 / Fax: 077-521-5030



Japan Heritage—Lake Biwa, Shiga

Takashima City



Lake Biwa and Waterside Scenes

A Heritage of Water in Living and Prayer



Shirahige Shrine



Traces of an ancient port town

Waterfront of Kaizu, Nishihama and Chinai

Important Cultural Landscape

The high stone walls built along the lake shore create a landscape like no other

The districts of Kaizu, Nishihama, and Chinai once flourished as port town, post town, and fishing village. Built along the shoreline of the lake, they are distinctive for their stone breakwaters. The waterfront scenery in these districts was selected as Japan's fifth important cultural landscape in 2008. The key components of the landscapes are the stone walls of Kaizu and Nishihama, the former warehouse of the fishing guild, and machiya townhouses built by merchants. The machiya are wooden structures that date to the end of the Edo Period (up to 1868) lining the street, serving as accommodations for travelers or housing commercial businesses.

The flow of life-giving water

Waterfront of Harie and Shimofuri

Important Cultural Landscape

People's clever system for using clear water from rivers is still in use today

The districts of Harie and Shimofuri, which have spring water (Shozu) gushing up from underground, are known for their ***kabata*** culture, ever-running water in kitchen basins that demonstrate care taken with water in everyday life, even today. The spring water flows from the Harie-Okawa River and Koike River through the inner lakes to Lake Biwa. The lake shoreline is taken over by reed beds, and the scenery remains today much as it was in the earliest days of Japan. Reed beds are a spawning ground for many types of fish that inhabit Lake Biwa. You can enjoy scenes of life-giving water flowing through the quiet countryside here.

Reserve for a tour. [Harie Shozu-no-Sato Committee]
Tel: 0740-25-6566 Hours: 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (In winter until 3:00 p.m.)



Grand torii gate standing in the lake

Shirahige Shrine

Important Cultural Property (building)

The great shrine gate puts on a different face with changes in light and season

The oldest shrine in Ōmi with a famous large torii gate rising out of Lake Biwa. The name “Shirahige” means “white beard” and the shrine is dedicated to the god of long life. It is one of the top power spots for visitors to Shiga. Also of interest are the many inscriptions of tanka poems by celebrated poets engraved on a monument within the shrine precinct. One poem is by the early modern poet Tekkan Yosano and his wife Akiko Yosano, written upon their visit, extolling the clear spring water that flowed in front of the shrine.

[Light-up of the torii gate in the water Days]
(1) Saturday, Sunday from sundown for approx. 2 hours
(2) On Sept. 5 from sunset until 10:00 p.m.
(3) New Year's Eve until daybreak (4) Jan. 1 – 5 from sunset until 9:00 p.m.
[Inquiries] 0740-36-1555



Gods that chase away river demons

Faith in the Shikobuchi gods

A unique religious faith of the Adogawa River system protects raftsmen from the demons of the river

The Shikobuchi gods are guardian deities of raftsmen belonging to a religious faith unique to the Adogawa river basin. A legend is told in which a Shikobuchi god and his son were rafting down the Adogawa and when they reached Obuchi, a kappa pulled the boy underwater to cause mischief, but the god chastised the demon who pledged from then on to keep rafts safe. The Adogawa River has many whitewater sections, and the dangerous work performed by raftsmen was life-threatening, so they built shrines for the Shikobuchi gods at dangerous spots along the river to chase away the river demons.



Communicates water usage wisdom

Waterfront scenery at Omizo

Important Cultural Landscape

Famed as the final battle spot of the Fujiwara no Nakamaro Rebellion in 764

In ancient times, Omizo flourished as the area surrounding Katsunozu port, connecting Wakasa (today southern Fukui) and the territories in the vicinity of Kyoto. The place names of the area appear in literature such as the Man'yōshū, compiled in the eighth century. Lake Otomegaike, one of Lake Biwa's inner lakes, was the location of the finale of the biggest civil war battle of the Nara period, the Fujiwara no Nakamaro Rebellion. Also, Oda Nobunaga built Omizo Castle as a strategic stronghold for controlling Lake Biwa in the closing years of the Warring States period. Omizo is known for its mountain spring water and well water that have been skillfully used in people's lives since ancient times, with special customs that still exist today.