

The World Heritage in Japan



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Located at the eastern edge of the Asian continent and surrounded on four sides by the sea, Japan is blessed with a rich nature, which shows a great variety throughout the seasons.

In its long history, Japan has adopted culture from abroad, especially from the Continent, as well as developing its own culture rooted in the sensibility nurtured by the colors of nature. Cultural properties in Japan are preserved and utilized under the Law for the Protection of Cultural properties, as well as the cultural properties protection ordinance of each local government, in order to contribute to the advancement of national and world culture.

In this way, each tangible and intangible heritage is protected under appropriate protection measures to each category. In order to protect the rich nature and biological diversity of our land, the Nature Conservation Law and the Natural Parks Law have been enacted.

In addition, cultural properties and nature are getting more accessible to people, through local activities of volunteers and NPOs, and the interest in conservation activities is growing. In line with spirit of the WH Convention, we will pass on this wonderful heritage to future generations and to share it with people all over the world.



Aerial view of the mining town of Aikawa - kamimachi
Source : Niigata Prefecture

The World Heritage Convention

The World Heritage Convention (The 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage) was adopted in 1972 by the General Conference of UNESCO, and has been concluded by 196 countries at present (2024. 10). Japan also accepted this convention in 1992, and has contributed to the establishment of a system of international cooperation and support, based on the recognition that it is important to protect cultural and natural heritage from such threats as damage and destruction and to preserve

them as the world heritage of all humankind.

Sites are inscribed on the World Heritage List through a process in which nominated properties from each country are examined by the World Heritage Committee, which consists of 21 countries. As of October 2024, 1223 properties have been inscribed on the list, of which 952 are cultural sites, 231 are natural sites, and 40 are mixed sites. Among them are 26 World Heritage properties in Japan, including 21 cultural sites and 5 natural sites.



Reconstructed Sado Magistrate' s Office
Source : Sado City



Ogiriya-mabu Tunnel Site
Source : Niigata Prefecture

Japan World Cultural Heritage List



① Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area

Property: 15 ha

Buffer Zone: 571 ha

Location: NARA Prefecture

Inscribed: 1993

Criteria: (i) (ii) (iv) (vi)

There are around 48 Buddhist monuments in the Horyu-ji area, in Nara Prefecture. Several date from the late 7th to early 8th century, making them some of the oldest surviving wooden buildings in the world. These masterpieces of wooden architecture are important not only for the history of art, since they illustrate the adaptation of Chinese Buddhist architecture and layout to Japanese culture, but also for the history of religion, since their construction coincided with the introduction of Buddhism to Japan from China by way of the Korean peninsula.



Please refer to the home page for more information.



Photo Courtesy of Himeji City

② Himeji-jo

Property: 107 ha

Buffer Zone: 143 ha

Location: HYOGO Prefecture

Inscribed: 1993

Criteria: (i) (iv)

Himeji-jo is the finest surviving example of early 17th-century Japanese castle architecture, comprising 83 buildings with highly developed systems of defence and ingenious protection devices dating from the beginning of the Shogun period. It is a masterpiece of construction in wood, combining function with aesthetic appeal, both in its elegant appearance unified by the white plastered earthen walls and in the subtlety of the relationships between the building masses and the multiple roof layers.



Provided by Kyoto City

③ Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto [Kyoto, Uji and Otsu Cities]

Property: 1,056 ha

Buffer Zone: 3,579 ha

Location: KYOTO and SHIGA Prefecture

Inscribed: 1994

Criteria: (ii) (iv)

Built in A.D.794 on the model of the capitals of ancient China, Kyoto was the imperial capital of Japan from its foundation until the middle of the 19th century. As the center of Japanese culture for more than 1,000 years, Kyoto illustrates the development of Japanese wooden architecture, particularly religious architecture, and the art of Japanese gardens, which has influenced landscape gardening the world over.



Photo Courtesy of Wakayama Prefecture

⑩ Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range

Property: 506.4 ha

Buffer Zone: 12,100 ha

Location: MIE, NARA and WAKAYAMA Prefecture

Inscribed: 2004 (2016: minor boundary modifications)

Criteria: (ii) (iii) (iv) (vi)

Set in the dense forests of the Kii Mountains overlooking the Pacific Ocean, three sacred sites—Yoshino and Omine, Kumano Sanzan, and Koyasan—linked by pilgrimage routes to the ancient capital cities of Nara and Kyoto, reflect the fusion of Shinto, rooted in the ancient tradition of nature worship in Japan, and Buddhism. The sites (506.4-ha) and their surrounding forest landscape reflect a persistent and extraordinarily well-documented tradition of sacred mountains over 1,200 years.



Photo Courtesy of Shimane Prefecture

⑪ Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape

Property: 529.17 ha

Buffer Zone: 3,134 ha

Location: SHIMANE Prefecture

Inscribed: 2007 (2010: minor boundary modifications)

Criteria: (ii) (iii) (v)

The property exhibits universal outstanding value as the site of the silver mine that produced a large amount of silver in the 16th and 17th centuries, triggered the mass production of gold and silver in Japan through the spread of its mining techniques to other mines throughout Japan, and exerted significant influence upon the history of the exchange of goods and communications among civilizations, not only between the nations of East Asia but also between East and West, reaching as far as Europe.



Photo Courtesy of Iwate Prefecture

⑫ Hiraizumi- Temples, Gardens and Archaeological Sites Representing the Buddhist Pure Land

Property: 176.2 ha

Buffer Zone: 6,008 ha

Location: IWATE Prefecture

Inscribed: 2011

Criteria: (ii) (vi)

"Hiraizumi" is a striking case of creation and aimed to realize the special expression of Buddhaksetra (Pure Land) in the real world based on Japanese Buddhism, thought of pure land grown from it in particular, which had been endowed with unique Japanese characteristics fused with ancient Japanese thought of nature worship, from the 6th century when Buddhism was introduced from China and the Korean Peninsula to the 12th century. "Hiraizumi" is a prominent representation of important human interaction in the sense of values as to design concept and design drafting of architecture and horticulture in East Asia as well as showing important steps of human history in these fields.





Photo Courtesy of Shirakawa Village Board of Education

④ Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama

Property: 68 ha
Buffer Zone: 58,873.1 ha

Location: Gifu and Toyama Prefecture
Inscribed: 1995
Criteria: (iv) (v)

Located in a mountainous region that was cut off from the rest of the world for a long period of time, these villages with their Gassho-style houses subsisted on the cultivation of mulberry trees and the rearing of silkworms. The large houses with their steeply pitched thatched roofs are the only examples of their kind in Japan. Despite economic upheavals, the villages of Ogimachi, Ainokura and Suganuma are outstanding examples of a traditional way of life perfectly adapted to the environment and people's social and economic circumstances.



Shirakawago



Gokayama



Photo Courtesy of Hiroshima Prefecture

⑤ Hiroshima Peace Memorial [Genbaku Dome]

Property: 0.4 ha
Buffer Zone: 42.7 ha

Location: HIROSHIMA Prefecture
Inscribed: 1996
Criteria: (vi)

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome) was the only structure left standing in the area where the first atomic bomb exploded on 6 August 1945. Through the efforts of many people, including those of the city of Hiroshima, it has been preserved in the same state as immediately after the bombing. Not only is it a stark and powerful symbol of the most destructive force ever created by humankind, it also expresses the hope for world peace and the ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons.



Photo Courtesy of Itsukushima Shinto Shrine

⑥ Itsukushima Shinto Shrine

Property: 431.2 ha
Buffer Zone: 2,634.3 ha

Location: HIROSHIMA Prefecture
Inscribed: 1996
Criteria: (i) (ii) (iv) (vi)

The island of Itsukushima, in the Seto inland sea, has been a holy place of Shintoism since the earliest times. The first shrine buildings here were probably erected in the 6th century. The present shrine dates from the 13th century and the harmoniously arranged buildings reveal great artistic and technical skill. The shrine plays on the contrasts in colour and form between mountains and sea and illustrates the Japanese concept of scenic beauty, which combines nature and human creativity.



Photo Courtesy of Yamanashi Prefecture

⑬ Fujisan, sacred place and source of artistic inspiration

Property: 20,702.1 ha
Buffer Zone: 49,627.7 ha

Location: YAMANASHI and SHIZUOKA Prefecture

Inscribed: 2013
Criteria: (iii) (vi)

Fujisan is a sacred and solemn figure, a holy place to which people make pilgrimages – from the foot of the mountain to its summit. This devotion gave birth to the cherished idea that "Fujisan" is believed to have gained the supernatural power of Shinto and Buddhist deities, and represents "symbolic death and spiritual rebirth", where one dies and is reborn. Fujisan has also been depicted in many works of art, such as Ukiyo-e paintings, and has had a profound effect on numerous foreign artists. Fujisan – sacred place and source of artistic inspiration – is highly appreciated and valued worldwide.



Photo Courtesy of Gunma Prefecture

⑭ Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites

Property: 7.2 ha
Buffer Zone: 414.6 ha

Location: GUNMA Prefecture
Inscribed: 2014
Criteria: (ii) (iv)

"Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites" consists of four sites that correspond to the different stages in the production of raw silk: the first-ever silk mill in Japan (Tomioka Silk Mill), the prototype of modern sericulture farmhouses (Tajima Yahei Sericulture Farm), the sericulture educational facility (Takayama-sha Sericulture School), and the cold storage facility for silkworm eggs (Arafune Cold Storage). These sites have worldwide significance as a place for technical exchange and innovation in the silkworm-raising and silk-reeling industries. This property was inscribed on the World Heritage List because it illustrates how Japan played a prominent role in the world's raw-silk market in the beginning of the 20th Century, based on mass production of high-quality raw silk realized by the contribution of these four sites that functioned together effectively.



Photo Courtesy of The World Heritage Council for the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution

⑮ Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining

Property: 306.66 ha
Buffer Zone: 2,408.33 ha

Location: FUKUOKA, SAGA, NAGASAKI, KUMAMOTO, KAGOSHIMA, YAMAGUCHI, IWATE and SHIZUOKA Prefecture

Inscribed: 2015
Criteria: (ii) (iv)

"Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining" encompasses a series of twenty three component parts, mainly located in the southwest of Japan. It bears testimony to the rapid industrialization of the country from the middle of the 19th century to the early 20th century, through the development of the iron and steel industry, shipbuilding and coal mining. The site illustrates the process by which feudal Japan sought technology transfer from Europe and America from the middle of the 19th century and how this technology was adapted to the country's needs and social traditions. The site testifies to what is considered to be the first successful transfer of Western industrialization to a non-Western nation.





Photographer: Tatehiko Yano, Photo Courtesy of Nara City

7 Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara

Property: 617 ha

Buffer Zone: 1,962.5 ha

Location: NARA Prefecture

Inscribed: 1998

Criteria: (ii) (iii) (iv) (vi)

Nara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 784. During this period the framework of national government was consolidated and Nara enjoyed great prosperity, emerging as the fountainhead of Japanese culture. The city's historic monuments-Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and the excavated remains of the great Imperial Palace-Provide a vivid picture of life in the Japanese capital in the 8th century, a period of profound political and cultural change.



8 Shrines and Temples of Nikko

Property: 50.8 ha

Buffer Zone: 373.2 ha

Location: TOCHIGI Prefecture

Inscribed: 1999

Criteria: (i) (iv) (vi)

The shrines and temples of Nikko, together with their natural surroundings, have for centuries been a sacred site known for its architectural and decorative masterpieces. They are closely associated with the history of the Tokugawa Shoguns. Ancient mountain worship, Buddhism, Shintoism and worship are combined, that is responsible for the unique religious space.



9 Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu

Property: 54.9 ha

Buffer Zone: 559.7 ha

Location: OKINAWA Prefecture

Inscribed: 2000

Criteria: (ii) (iii) (vi)

Five hundred years of Ryukyuan history (12th-17th century) are represented by this group of sites and monuments. The ruins of the castles, on imposing elevated sites, are evidence for the social structure over much of that period, while the sacred sites provide mute testimony to the rare survival of an ancient form of religion into the modern age. The wideranging economic and cultural contacts of the Ryukyu Islands over that period gave rise to a unique culture.



Photo Courtesy of The National Museum of Western Art

16 The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement

(The National Museum of Western Art)

Property: 98 ha

(0.93 ha in the National Museum of Western Art)

Buffer Zone: 1,409 ha

(116.17 ha in the National Museum of Western Art)

Location: TOKYO Metropolitan Government

Inscribed: 2016

Criteria: (i) (ii) (vi)

Chosen from the work of the architect and urban planner based in Paris known as Le Corbusier. It consists of 17 sites of assets over seven countries in three continents. It's a testimonial to the invention of a practical architecture that made a break with the first in history and each property demonstrates a new concept which corresponds to social and human need. These sites were reviewed favorably because of their global impact and were inscribed as World Cultural Heritage. The National Museum of Western Art in Japan is especially valuable in terms of showing characteristics of design elements by Le Corbusier.



Photo Courtesy of the World Heritage Promotion Committee of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and associated sites in the Munakata Region

17 The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region

Property: 98.93 ha

Buffer Zone: 79,363.48 ha

Location: FUKUOKA Prefecture

Inscribed: 2017

Criteria: (ii) (iii)

On Okinoshima, the religious sites remain virtually untouched and stand as record to the ritual practices that took place mainly from the 4th to the 9th century. Additionally, Okitsu-miya shrine, Nakatsu-miya and Hetsu-miya are known as a part of the Shinto shrine complex, the Munakata Taisha, and are still used today as places of worship. The Shimbaru - Nuyama mound tomb group remains as a testimony to those countless worshippers who nurtured and maintained ritual practices through the ages. On the "Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region"- the cultural practices on the sacred Island and at the worship places started during a period of time when active exchange with other countries in ancient East Asia was intensifying. It was registered as a world heritage site because it stands as a physical record to those who have prayed for safety on the seas, with those practices continuing until today.



Photographer: Tsutomu Ikeda

18 Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region

Property: 5,566.55 ha

Buffer Zone: 12,252.52 ha

Location: NAGASAKI and KUMAMOTO Prefecture

Inscribed: 2018

Criteria: (iii)

In the 16th century, Christianity came to Japan. The Tokugawa Shogunate subsequently banned Christianity, but in Nagasaki region, despite the particularly harsh environment, the *Hidden Christians* continued and transmitted their faith in secret. They co-existed within the societal and religious conditions of the times, while nurturing their own special and unique cultural traditions. As these sites are valuable evidence of the *Hidden Christians*, they have been registered on UNESCO's World Heritage List.



Japan World Natural Heritage List



1 Yakushima

Location: KAGOSHIMA Prefecture
Inscribed: 1993 Criteria: (vii) (ix)



2 Shirakami-Sanchi

Location: AOMORI and AKITA Prefecture
Inscribed: 1993 Criteria: (ix)



Photo Courtesy of Ministry of the Environment

5 Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, Northern part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island

Property: 42,698 ha
Buffer Zone: 24,467 ha

Location: KAGOSHIMA and OKINAWA Prefectures
Inscribed: 2021
Criteria: (x)

The property is part of the Ryukyu Chain scattered in an arc, about 1,200 km long. It is a serial property consisting of these four islands: Amami-Oshima Island and Tokunoshima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture; and the northern part of Okinawa Island and Iriomote Island in Okinawa Prefecture.

The property are locations that serve as a habitat for terrestrial flora and fauna, including 95 endangered species (75 of which are endemic) on the IUCN Red List, such as the Iriomote cat, the Amami rabbit, and the Okinawa rail. There are also various examples of relict endemic species as well as new endemic species that reflect the area's geological history.

From a global perspective, it is a site that includes an extremely important natural habitat with regard to in-situ conservation of biodiversity.



3 Shiretoko

Location: HOKKAIDO Prefecture
Inscribed: 2005 Criteria: (ix) (x)



4 Ogasawara Islands

Location: TOKYO Metropolitan Government
Inscribed: 2011 Criteria: (ix)



Photo Courtesy of Sakai City

19 Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan

Property: 166.66 ha
Buffer Zone: 891 ha

Location: OSAKA Prefecture
Inscribed: 2019 (2023: minor boundary modifications)
Criteria: (iii) (iv)

Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group is located on a plateau adjoining Osaka Bay, which used to be one of the political and cultural centers of the Japanese archipelago. This property faced a bay which was a maritime gateway to continental Asia in the peak of the Kofun period (from the late 4th through the late 5th century). It is a globally exceptional site that includes burial mounds of various sizes and shapes, ranging from a 500m-long keyhole-shaped mound to a 20m-long round and square mounds. These tombs were geometrically designed for funeral rituals and decorated with the various shape of clay figures, Haniwa. This site represents the outstanding technological peak of earthen structure, and the distinguished Japanese culture of the Kofun period.



sources: JOMON ARCHIVES

20 Jomon Prehistoric Sites in Northern Japan

Property: 141.9 ha
Buffer Zone: 984.8 ha

Location: Hokkaido, Aomori, Iwate, and Akita Prefecture
Inscribed: 2021
Criteria: (iii) (v)

The Jomon Prehistoric Sites in Northern Japan serve as cultural heritage sites that attest to the livelihoods and spirituality of people who led a sedentary way of life based on hunting, fishing and gathering over a period of more than 10,000 years. They consist of 17 archaeological sites in Hokkaido, Aomori, Iwate and Akita prefectures.

People in Northern Japan, where these sites are located, initiated a sedentary way of life around 15,000 years ago that was enabled by abundant forest resources, such as beech and chestnut trees, and plentiful aquatic resources at the intersection of warm and cold currents off the coast. Over the course of subsequent years, they continued a lifestyle based on hunting, fishing and gathering for a long period of time, while adapting to environmental changes. During this period, people developed a complex spiritual culture as evident in clay figurines, stone circles and other archaeological finds at the sites.



Photo Courtesy Niigata Prefecture

21 Sado Island Gold Mines

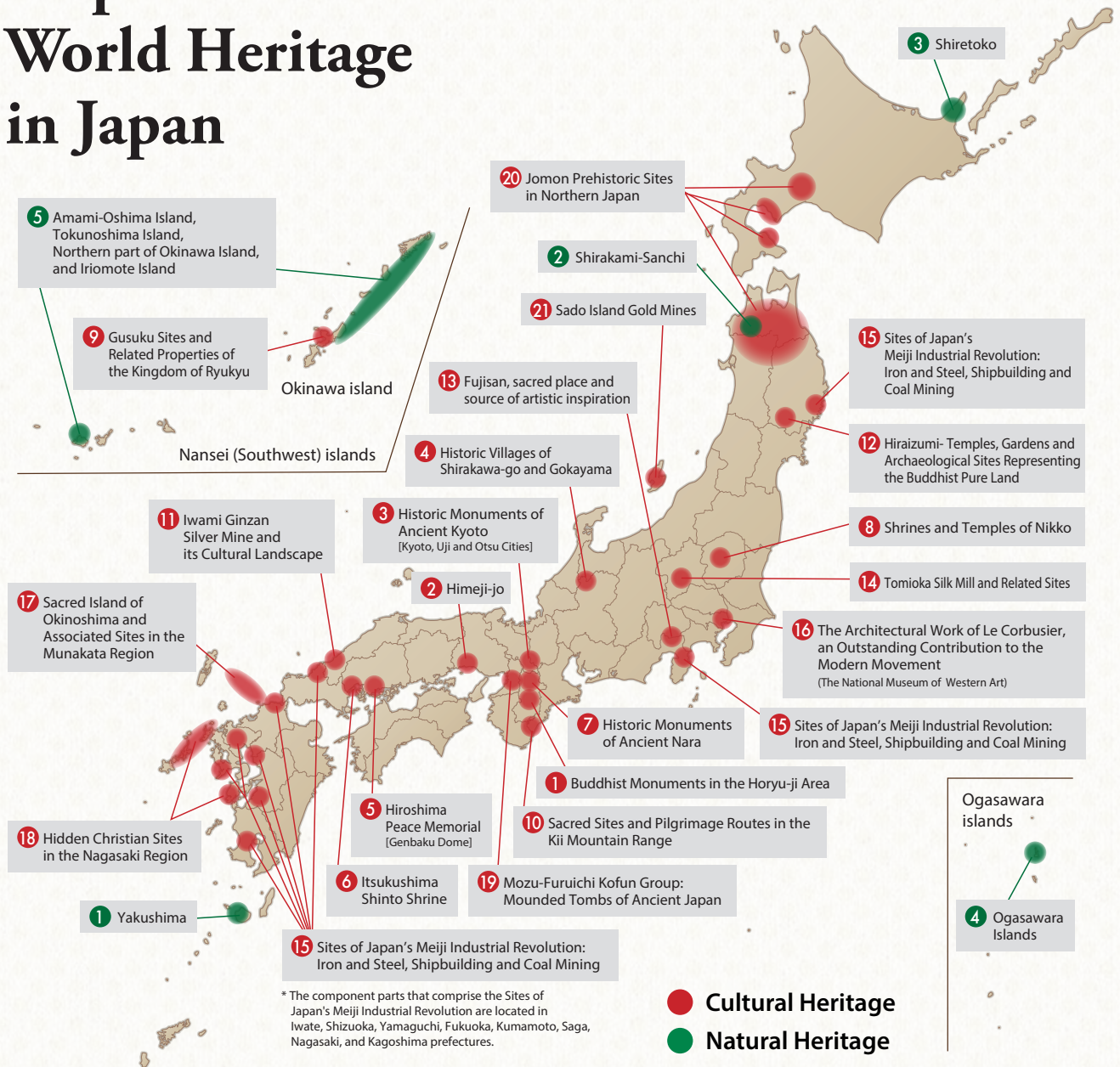
Property: 750.9 ha
Buffer Zone: 1,527.1 ha

Location: NIIGATA Prefecture
Inscribed: 2024
Criteria: (iv)

Sado Island Gold Mines were the world's largest gold producing place in the 17th century, and are relics that demonstrate a gold production system that evolved from traditional unmechanized gold production techniques and production systems suited to them to fit the characteristics of each mine from the 16th to 19th centuries, when mechanization was progressing in mines around the world. With advanced mining and smelting techniques accordingly applied to the type of gold deposit, the management and operation system introduced by the Tokugawa Shogunate made it possible to mine and process large quantities of high-quality gold of world standard in the 17th century.



Map of World Heritage in Japan



To be inscribed on the World Heritage List, nominated properties must meet at least one of the following criteria prescribed in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, as well as meeting standards for authenticity and integrity, and must be protected and managed under appropriate systems.

Criteria for the assessment of outstanding universal value

- (i) represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
- (ii) exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- (iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
- (iv) be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
- (v) be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
- (vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);
- (vii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
- (viii) be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
- (ix) be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;
- (x) contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.



COVER: Doyu-No-Warito(source: Niigata Prefecture)
BACK COVER: Sado no kuni kanahorino maki (source: Aikawa Folk Museum)