



The wild deer in Nara Park are cherished as messengers of the gods.

# Explore Nara, the place where Japan was born

Trace the grand river of history to a time when kings and religions shaped the ‘Land of the Rising Sun’

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Nara Prefecture is often described as a tourist destination easily accessible from Kyoto and Osaka. However, it could also be said that Kyoto and Osaka owe their development as cities to their proximity to Nara.

This is because the Nara region sat at the heart of national polity for over five centuries, dating back to the advent of the Yamato Kingship in the fourth century. Nara was the birthplace of the nation we now call Japan.

Surrounded by mountains in the northwestern part of the prefecture, the Nara Basin occupies a particularly pivotal place in Japanese history, with the area home to many *kofun* (burial mounds), ancient palace sites and famous temples and shrines like Horyuji, Todaiji, Kofukuji and Kasuga Grand Shrine.

Nara’s scenery is markedly different from Kyoto’s, too. In Kyoto, temples and shrines can appear like isolated islands amid an ocean of modern concrete buildings. Nara is less urbanized, with its landscape of mountains and rivers lifted straight from the pages of the “Manyoshu,” Japan’s oldest poetry anthology. As such, visitors can be forgiven for imagining they have traveled back to ancient times.

## Buddhism’s impact on court, culture

Until the sixth century, Japan was ruled by kings who strove to establish a unified government while representing the powerful tribes that held sway over each region. Each time power changed hands, new courts were established in an area encompassing modern-day Nara Prefecture and

eastern Osaka Prefecture.

Political and administrative rule was not solely the preserve of the court, with the authority of the royal family also maintained locally by elite clans. Consequently, the area surrounding the court never fully developed into what could be described as a town.

From the end of the sixth century, the court settled around the village of Asuka in the southern part of the Nara Basin. This stability led to an increase in political, economic, religious and cultural institutions, with the most important role played by temples.

According to some theories, Buddhism originated in India in the fifth century B.C. before developing into a global religion in East Asia.

It arrived in Japan via China and the Korean Peninsula around the middle of the sixth century. Some clans subsequently built their own temples in Asuka. However, Japan already had its own indigenous faith and gods, so on a national level, the arrival and acceptance of this new “global” religion posed huge political problems and potentially threatened civil war.

The acceptance of Buddhism also entailed the wholesale introduction of new technologies, personnel and culture from the continent to facilitate the establishment of new “hardware” in the form

**The court settled near Asuka and saw a rise in political, economic, religious and cultural institutions, the most important being temples.**



This stone-paved square and large well date back to the time of the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace (672 to 694).

of temples and “software” in the form of Buddhism itself.

Horyuji Temple, a World Heritage Site and the world’s oldest wooden structure, is considered an archetypal Japanese tourist spot by many foreign tourists. When Horyuji was first built, however, it did not seem particularly “Japanese” to the local residents, with the temple serving as a kind of university, attracting the best and most advanced technologies and culture from overseas.

This dynamic story of domestic and international politics is told through historical materials like *mokkan* (wooden tablets) and other illuminating archaeological finds, including resplen-

dent adornments worn by emergent powerful figures, magnificent weapons and other items from daily life. These treasures can be viewed at The Museum, Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture and at many other museums throughout the prefecture.

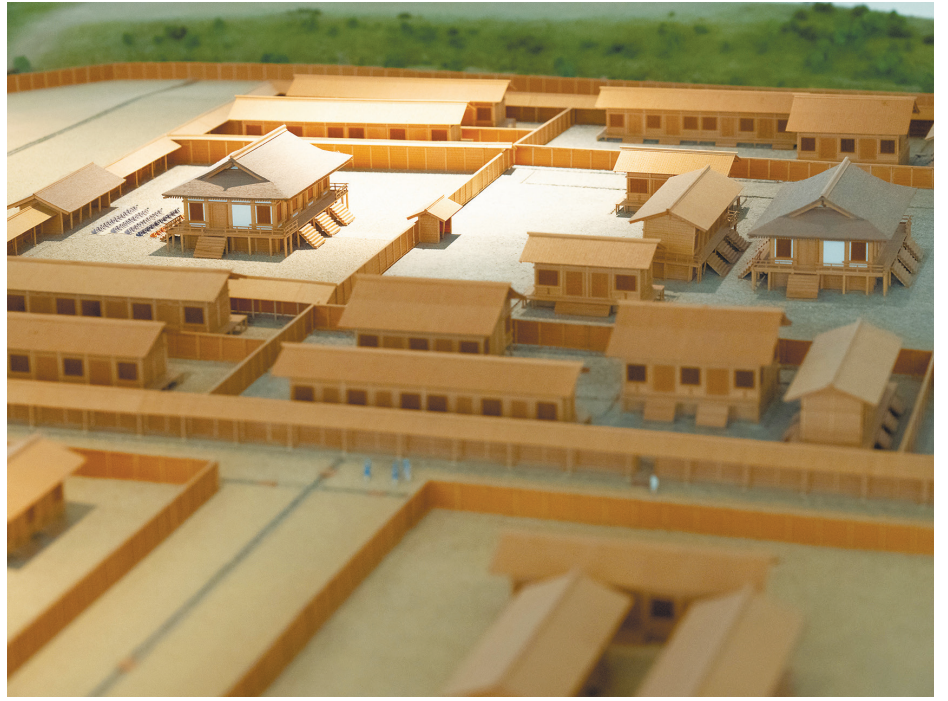
## The rise of Fujiwara-kyo

At the end of the seventh century, the capital moved from Asuka to Fujiwara-kyo. The streets of the new capital were laid out in a grid pattern, modeled after advanced cities abroad. The city expanded across 5.3 square kilometers around a palace over 900 square meters. Government by a

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Haniwa (tomb sculptures) of horses from the mid-Kofun Period (250 to 552) excavated from Shijo Tomb No. 1 in Nara Prefecture and a model of Asuka Kiyomihara Palace are displayed at The Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture.



This late sixth century gilt bronze saddle fitting, excavated from the Fujinoki Tumulus in Nara Prefecture, belongs to the Agency for Cultural Affairs and is on display at The Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture.



Then-curator Yasutoshi Tsurumi, now a professor at Nagoya University, shows the author around the museum.

## A center of culture and Buddhist art

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coalition of elite clans was now replaced by a centralized administration run by the emperor and his retainers, based on the Chinese legal system.

The tale of this dramatic leap from village to town can be traced through the extant historical ruins, with the monumental expanse of the Fujiwara Palace Site contrasting sharply with the compact nature of the Asuka Palace Site.

Excavation on the Fujiwara Palace Site began in 1966, with the palace's actual appearance growing clearer by the day. Surveyed locations have been reburied, but the raised foundation of the palace's Daigokuden (Imperial Audience Hall) still exists, and the remains of some postholes have been marked with red pillars, so visitors can still sense the scale of the buildings that once stood there. The famous peaks mentioned in the "Manyoshu," including Mount Amanokagu to the east, Mount Unebi to the west and Mount Miminashi to the north, can also be seen from the site.

Collectively, these ruins are known as the Asuka-Fujiwara sites and are expected to be added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2026.

### Treasures of Heijo-kyo

After 16 years, the capital was moved north from Fujiwara-kyo to the other side of the Nara Basin. The new capital Heijo-kyo was founded in 710 in the center of the basin's northern end, an area that now encompasses Nara's prefectural and municipal offices and a bustling downtown area.

After initially blooming in Asuka, Buddhist culture was now incorporated into urban design, with plans for Heijo-kyo including the development of religious spaces, as epitomized by the founding of great temples like Kofukuji and Yakushiji.

These temples were cherished and protected by

countless people through the ages and can still be visited to this day, over a thousand years later. As Japan is surrounded by the sea and thus harder to invade, a great many of its ancient cultural properties have survived to the present. This is not to say they have never been endangered, though.

**The Nara National Museum was founded to protect Buddhist treasures and maintains one of the world's finest collections of Buddhist sculpture surviving today.**

As Japan modernized in the 19th century, the government moved to clearly separate Buddhism and Shintoism from one another. The two religions had previously coexisted, but many Buddhist temples were destroyed during this period, and many Buddhist artworks were taken from the country. This government policy had a major impact in Nara, home to numerous temples.

The Imperial Nara Museum, now known as the Nara National Museum, was founded in 1889 to protect Buddhist treasures and spread awareness of their value. This museum system was one of several frameworks that arose through a process of trial and error to ensure the survival of cultural properties, with Japan's system of cultural heritage protection now renowned across the world.

The museum's Buddhist Sculpture Hall dis-  
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Excavations of the Asuka Palace Site have revealed the remains of three layers of overlapping structures: the Asuka Okamoto Palace, the Asuka Itabuki Palace and the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace.



Nara Prefecture's cherished deer can often be seen around the souvenir shops that line the approach to Todaiji Temple.



This pair of 5-meter Guardian King statues, Important Cultural Properties from Kinpusenji temple in Nara Prefecture, have been on display at the Buddhist Sculpture Hall of the Nara National Museum since February 2021.

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plays around a hundred statues at all times, showcasing examples representative of the flourishing of Buddhist sculpture in Japan from the sixth to 14th centuries, including many works that have been designated National Treasures or Important Cultural Properties under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

In terms of both quality and quantity, this is one of the world's finest collections of Buddhist sculpture. The works on display reveal how Japanese sculptors studied those produced in China and the Korean Peninsula to create their own sculptures infused with a uniquely Japanese aesthetic. The resulting works offer insight into the highest aesthetic standards of Buddhist sculpture in contemporaneous China and the Korean Peninsula, examples of which only rarely survived in their places of origin.

The brilliant essence of the Buddhist art that

has been lost in much of East Asia was revived again in Nara, a city at the center of what was becoming an island-nation at the eastern periphery of the Eurasian continent. The capital later moved to Kyoto and then Tokyo, but the radiance and reverberations of Japan's early history can still be experienced in Nara's historical sites, temples and museums.

*Compiled with the cooperation of:* Yasutoshi Tsurumi, curator of The Museum, Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture (1994 to 2024) and professor at Nagoya University, Graduate School of the Humanities, and Tomoji Iwai, curator of sculpture, Nara National Museum

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Halo fragments from an eighth century statue of Juichimen Kannon that was damaged by a fire at Todaiji Temple in 1667



**Mari Hashimoto**

Director of Kankitsuzan Art Museum establishment preparation office, Odawara Art Foundation; former vice-chairperson of Eisei Bunko Museum (a private museum of the Hosokawa dynasty); visiting professor, Kanazawa Institute of Technology

## NARA NATIONAL MUSEUM

**Address:** 50 Noborioji-cho, Nara 630-8213

**Hours:** 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays, and till 7 p.m. on Saturdays.

Last entry: 30 mins before closing.

In addition, there may be temporary changes to museum hours.

**Closed:** On Mondays\* and from Dec. 28 to Jan. 1.

\*When a national holiday falls on a Monday, the museum opens but closes on Tuesday instead. For consecutive holidays, the museum opens but closes on the day after they end.

Please note that the museum may occasionally open on Mondays or close on days other than those listed above. For the latest schedule and details, please check the official website.

The Buddhist Sculpture Hall will be closed for renovations for about a year and a half, starting Sept. 14.

**Website:** <https://www.narahaku.go.jp/english/>



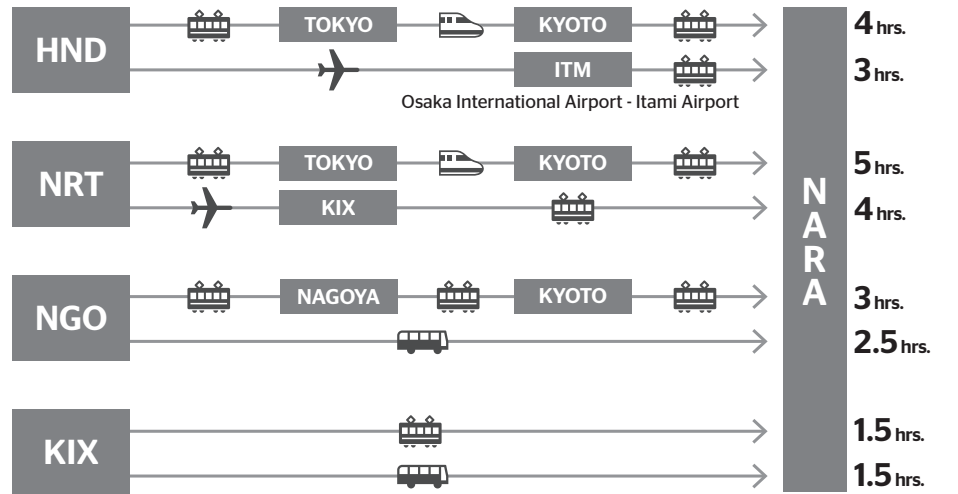
INFORMATION

# A TREASURE TROVE OF HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY



For those interested in East Asia's ancient capitals, Nara cannot be missed. The city's unique landscape is dotted with palace ruins and old wooden structures, and appears today much as it did during the Nara Period (710 to 794).

The region was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998 and boasts two more World Heritage Sites within its namesake prefecture. Nara has vividly preserved the past in its natural scenery, temples, shrines and culture.



SOURCE: JAPAN CULTURAL EXPO

JAPAN TIMES GRAPHIC

## Todaiji Temple, cultural center and museum



Todaiji was built in the eighth century after the Emperor ordered the construction of state-sponsored temples across Japan. The temple and its colossal Great Buddha statue have played key roles in Japanese Buddhism while surviving numerous disasters. The temple complex has been rebuilt several times and now represents multiple eras and styles. The Todai-ji Museum showcases the temple's history and art, including valuable Nara Period statues originally housed in its oldest structure.



KAZUYOSHI MIYOSHI; NARA VISITORS BUREAU

**Todaiji Temple (Kegon Sect)**  
**Address:** 406-1 Zoushicho, Nara  
**Tel:** 0742-22-5511  
**URL:** <https://www.todaiji.or.jp/en/>



**Todaiji Cultural Center (Todai-ji Museum)**  
**Address:** 100 Suimoncho, Nara  
**Tel:** 0742-20-5511  
**URL:** <https://www.todaiji.or.jp/en/information/museum/>



## Nara Palace Site Historical Park



Heijo-kyo was Japan's capital from 710 to the end of the eighth century. Built in a sprawling grid pattern around the imperial palace, the city was inhabited by around 100,000 people. Excavations in the 19th century gradually revealed the ruins, and part of the site is now a park where visitors can explore its contours through the Excavation Site Exhibition Hall, Nara Palace Site Museum and reconstructions of the Suzaku Gate and Former Imperial Audience Hall.



GETTY IMAGES

**Addresses:** 4-6-1 Nijo-ojiminami, Nara; Sakicho, Nara  
**Tel:** 0742-36-8780 (Nara Palace Site Management Center)  
**URL:** <https://www.heijo-park.jp/en/>  
**Opening hours:** See website for details.  
**Admission:** Free



## Kasuga Grand Shrine and museum



Kasuga Grand Shrine was built at the foot of Mount Mikasa in 768 and has been venerated by the imperial family and the public ever since. The deer on the grounds are cherished as divine messengers, with the mountain behind considered sacred. Since hunting and logging are forbidden, the area has become a Special Natural Monument called Mount Kasuga Primeval Forest. The nearby museum exhibits treasures from the ninth to 12th centuries.



GETTY IMAGES

**Address:** 160 Kasuganocho, Nara  
**Tel:** 0742-22-7788  
**URL:** [https://www.kasugataisha.or.jp/en/about\\_en/](https://www.kasugataisha.or.jp/en/about_en/)  
**Opening hours and admissions:** See website for details.



## The Museum, Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture

The Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture has been researching buried cultural properties in Nara since 1938. These artifacts are featured at the museum's "Archaeology of Yamato" exhibition, which presents the history of Japan and Nara from the Paleolithic age to the 16th century. Thanks to its focus and a 2021 update, visitors can always encounter artifacts from the Kurozuka Tomb, Fujinoki Tomb and other sites that had a major impact on Japanese archaeology.



**Address:** 50-2 Unebicho, Kashihara, Nara  
**Tel:** 0744-24-1185  
**URL:** <http://www.kashikoken.jp/museum/gaikokugo/en/>  
**Opening hours:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
**Closed:** Mondays and holidays designated by the museum  
**Admission:** ¥400 for adults, ¥300 for university and high school students and ¥200 for junior high and elementary school students. Fees may change for special exhibitions.

