

A photograph of the Nishina Shinmei Shrine, showing traditional Japanese wooden buildings with steeply pitched, layered roofs. The shrine is nestled in a lush green forest of tall trees. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

■ Nishina Shinmei Shrine

Japan's Oldest Extant Shrine in the *Shinmei-zukuri* Style

Nishina Shinmei Shrine, a national treasure, is located at the foot of a mountain that leads to high peaks in Japan. The shrine buildings have passed on an ancient style to the present day and boast a dignified presence among the beautiful forest.

SASAKI TAKASHI

O machi City, with a population of 27,000, is located in the north-western part of Nagano Prefecture and is surrounded by nearby mountains. It is the gateway to mountain climbing and tourism in the Hida Mountains with its many 3,000 meter high peaks, also known as the Japanese Northern Alps. Nishina Shinmei Shrine, a national treasure, is built in a hilly area of the city.

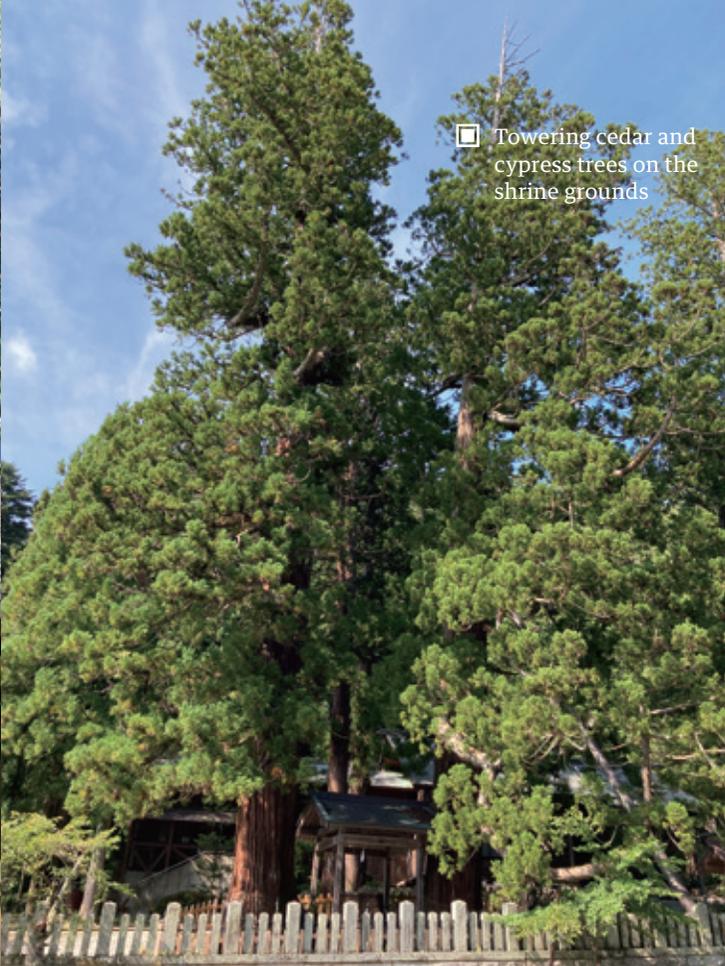
It is unclear when Nishina Shinmei Shrine was founded, but it is thought that the shrine has more than 900 years of history. In the past, this area was known as Mikuriya (the honorific term for a “demesne”) and was a place to procure hemp and Japanese paper offerings for the gods to be offered at Ise Jingu, the most prestigious shrine in Japan.

Just like Ise Jingu, Nishina Shinmei Shrine enshrines Amaterasu Omikami, the mythical Japanese sun goddess, and the shrine buildings were built in the *Shinmei-zukuri* style. The prototype for this style is said to be ancient Japanese granaries built with a raised floor (*takayuka-shiki*). This characteristic style, which raises the floors high off the ground to allow for good ventilation and to prevent humidity, was established during the Yayoi period (from around the 10th century BCE to 300 CE). Japanese cypress, one of the finest materials used in Japanese wooden construction, was used as a building material, and the style features simple, straight lines, making use of the beauty of the cypress tree bark itself. The *honden* (main hall) and *chumon* (inner gate), as well as the *tsuriya* (suspended roof) which con-

nects the two, have been designated as national treasures, as they are the oldest examples of *Shinmei-zukuri* architecture in Japan.

Miyazaki Eisuke, a representative of shrine parishioners helping to manage Nishina Shinmei Shrine, says, “At Nishina Shinmei Shrine, the *Shikinen Sengu* is carried out once every twenty years, just like at Ise Jingu. There are thirty-five *munafuda*-wooden ridge plaques which record the details of the ritual-in existence, starting with one from 1376.”

Shikinen Sengu is a ritual where the *shaden*, or main building of the shrine, is rebuilt at an adjacent site in a specific architectural style at regular intervals and the object of worship is transferred to the newly-rebuilt building. This ritual has been carried out for over 1,300 years at Ise Jingu.



❑ Towering cedar and cypress trees on the shrine grounds



❑ The roof of the main hall, thatched with cypress bark



❑ The raised-floor granary

Full of pride, Miyazaki says, “There aren’t any other examples in Japan of carrying out Shikinen Sengu continuously for so long without any breaks, even amidst war or disaster.”

Among Nishina Shinmei Shrine’s wooden munafuda, the twenty-seven plaques from before modern times have been designated as Important Cultural Properties, and from the records remaining on these plaques, we know that the main building was not fully rebuilt in the Shikinen Sengu carried out in the early part of the Edo period in 1636. Only the re-thatching of the roofs and repairs for damaged parts were undertaken for the main hall, inner gate, and suspended roof, and so these buildings from that time, built close to 400 years ago, have been maintained as they are.

In November 2019, Shikinen

Sengu was carried out as scheduled for the first time in twenty years at Nishina Shinmei Shrine. The main parts of the main hall were left as is, but the roof was re-thatched by layering thinly sliced Japanese cypress bark layers in a process called *hiwadabuki*, and damaged parts were also repaired. The beautiful appearance of the main hall was thus restored, and the object of worship, which had been moved to a temporary shrine, was once again transferred to its proper place in the main hall.

Around Nishina Shinmei Shrine, which boasts expansive grounds of nearly 20,000 square meters, is a dense forest, with large Japanese cedar and Japanese cypress trees standing as if reaching for the heavens, including two Japanese cedars estimated to be about 1,000 years

old. Due to its mysterious atmosphere, this forest has gained popularity among young women and others as a location flowing with mystical energy that can increase one’s fortunes. Solemnly standing within this dense forest, Nishina Shinmei Shrine has become a place of prayer and, though not well connected by public transport, is visited by around 30,000 worshippers each year. ㊦



❑ Wooden munafuda