

Secrets of Itsukushima Shrine's Great Vermillion Ōtorii Gate



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The Great Vermillion Ōtorii Gate

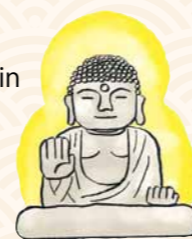
The Great Ōtorii Gate of Itsukushima Shrine stands in the sea, approximately 160 meters from the edge of the shrine. It is the largest wooden Torii Gate in all of Japan, and is designated as an Important National Cultural Asset. This Ōtorii was completed in 1875.



The Ōtorii stands 16.6m tall

Let's compare

- The 5th floor of a typical condominium in Japan: 14~15m
- The Giant Buddha of Nara: 14.98m
- Faces on Mount Rushmore: 18.3m
- Equal to the height of three giraffes



The main pillars measure nearly 10m around at their base

Arms extended, let's compare

How wide is it when you stretch out your arms to the right and left?
How many people does it take to reach around?



The crosspiece on top is 24.2m long

Let's compare

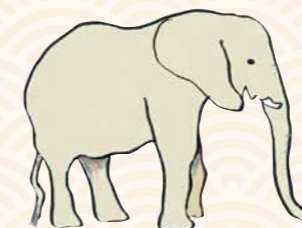
- School swimming pool: 25m
- Shinkansen railcar: approx. 25m



The Ōtorii weighs nearly 60 tons

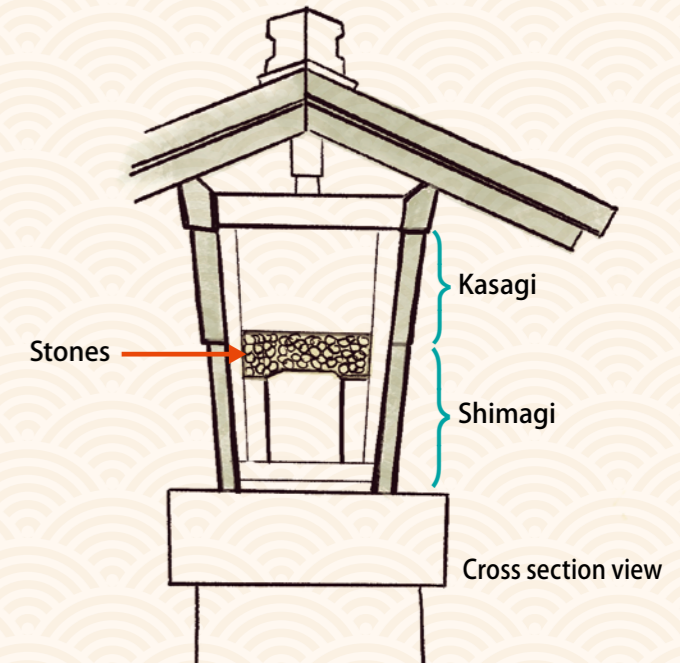
Let's compare

- Equal to about 10 male African elephants
- 30,000 two-liter bottles of water



Secret to its weight

The total weight of the Ōtorii is said to be about 60 tons. It is not embedded into the sand, but merely rests on the seabed by its own vast weight. The Ōtorii is made completely out of wood, so what is the secret of its weight? The key is held in the top cross-piece. The crosspiece is built like a box and contains over 4 tons of stones!



Secret beneath the pillars

Buried in the sand beneath the pillars of the Ōtorii are many pilings made from whole pine trees to stabilize the seabed. Each piling is 3.6 meters long. All of the pilings come from trees harvested in the Tataragata area of Miyajima.



Secrets of the Main Pillars

The two main pillars are made from camphor trees. Camphor is a hardwood that has the power to repel insects and resist water.



Thanks to their massive base, they are able to stand straight while only resting on the sandy seabed.

The main pillar bases alternate between being submerged in salt water and then drying out, making them more susceptible to damage.

In 1950, the damaged bases of the pillars were cut off and replaced with new camphor tree trunks.



The part of the base below the red line was replaced with a new tree trunk.



Secrets of the Ornaments

There are various ornamental decorations on the Ōtorii.

First, we can see the Sun (gold gilt over blue copper) attached to the top crosspiece on the east side and the gold gilt Moon on the west side.

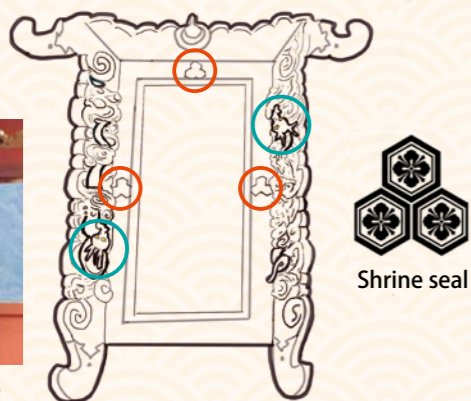


The Moon (west side)

The plaque frame on the seaward side, which reads "Itsukushima Jinja," is decorated with the shrine seal in three places. Additionally, two dragons can be found carved into the plaque.



Seaward plaque



The shrine seals are circled in red and the dragons in blue.



Shrine seal

Secrets of the Main Pillars of the Ōtorii



Sakura-hime
She is a princess who loves Miyajima.



Miya-kun
He is currently studying about Miyajima. He loves to eat momiji manju.

Q1

They say the two large pillars of the Ōtorii are made from giant camphor trees. Does Miyajima have such huge trees growing on the island?



A1

Long ago, camphor trees from Miyajima or within Hiroshima Prefecture were used. However, for the present Great Ōtorii Gate, they couldn't find any trees big enough in this area to build it.

That's why they had to travel far and wide for a long time in search of the camphor trees. At last, two giant trees, one from Miyazaki and another from Kagawa Prefecture were found and hauled back to Miyajima.



Q2

Wow! They went looking all the way to Miyazaki and Kagawa Prefectures! How did they bring the trees back to Miyajima?



A2

Since both of them were located near the sea, they were transported by ship.



Q3

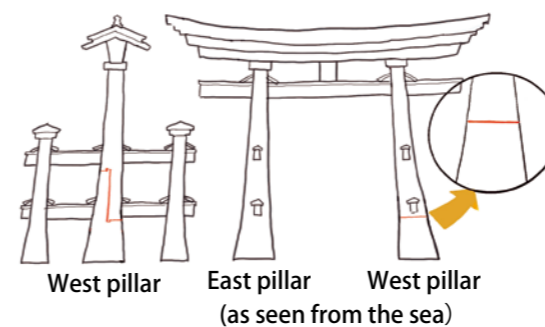
So, they carried them by boat! That must have been very difficult. Do you know how to tell which one is from Miyazaki and which one is from Kagawa?



A3

The pillar on the east side came from Miyazaki and the one on the west side came from Kagawa. However, the tree from Kagawa was shorter than the one from Miyazaki. Therefore, a camphor tree which grew on Miyajima was used to make the base for the west pillar.

In the diagram here, the portion above the red line is the camphor tree from Kagawa, and the part below is of the tree from Miyajima.



West pillar

East pillar

West pillar (as seen from the sea)



Using trees with different lengths and heights is amazing. The builders were really ingenious!



Secrets of the plaques



Outward (towards the sea)



Inward (towards the shrine)

There are two plaques attached to the crosspiece. Each plaque has different Kanji characters inscribed on them. On the sea side, it reads "Itsukushima Jinja" and on the shrine side, "Itsukushima Jinja".

The size of the plaque is nearly two meters tall and 1.2 meters wide.

Q1

Why are there two different names on the gate? Is there another shrine named "Itsukushima Jinja"?



A1

Itsukushima Jinja is the same shrine as Itsukushima Jinja. Itsukushima Jinja was the older name which has been used for over 1,000 years.



Q2

So, you're saying the shrine's name is written on both plaques, right?



A2

The Ōtorii serves as the sea entrance gate to Itsukushima Shrine.

During the Kangen-sai festival, the most important festival of Itsukushima Shrine, the Goddess of the shrine is placed aboard a special boat (Gozabune) and passes through the gate. The plaques on the Ōtorii are the nameplates of the shrine.



From the Kangen-sai festival

