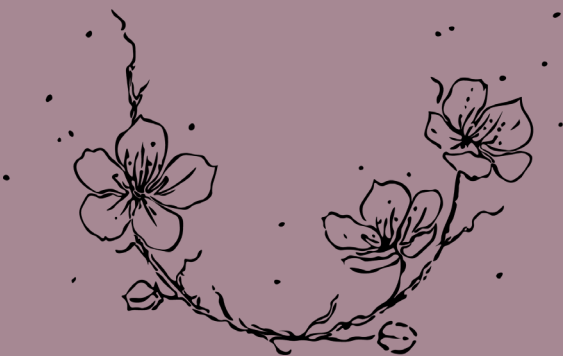


NARA, the capital of Nara prefecture, is a small city in the Kansai region. In spite of its size, Nara has a very long and illustrious history, and is an easy day-trip from Kyoto or Osaka.

In ancient times, Shinto rites of purity decreed that, with the death of an emperor, the capital must be relocated. So it was around Nara that all of Japan's original capitals were established between the third and eighth centuries. From 710 Nara was declared the "permanent capital," only for the Imperial family to be moved 84 years later to what was then called Heiankyo, now Kyoto.

Hundreds of serene temples, gardens, and shrines, and a handful of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, remain as elegant testaments to Nara's ancient status. The most famous is Todaiji Temple, site of the world's largest wooden building and with the world's largest gilded bronze Buddha.



Two railway companies, JR and Kintetsu, provide train connections between Kyoto and Nara:

By Japan Railways (JR)

Direct, 45 minutes, 720 yen one way, two connections per hour

Miyakoji rapid trains operate every 30 minutes between Kyoto Station and JR Nara Station. The one way trip takes 45 minutes, costs 720 yen and is covered by the Japan Rail Pass. For the same fare, the trip could also be made by twice-hourly local trains in 75 minutes.

By Kintetsu Railways

0-1 transfers, 35-45 minutes, 640-1160 yen one way, multiple connections per hour

Twice-hourly limited express trains take about 35 minutes and cost 1160 yen for the one way trip from Kyoto Station to Kintetsu Nara Station. Alternatively, there are hourly direct express trains that take 45 minutes and cost 640 yen one way. There are additional connections by express trains if you do not mind transferring once at Yamato-Saidaiji Station. The Japan Rail Pass is not valid on Kintetsu trains.





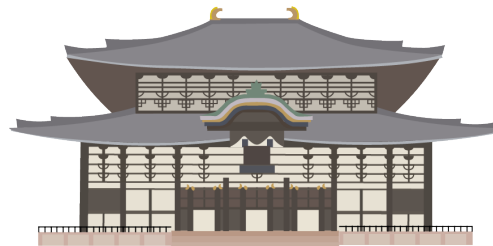
Nara Park (奈良公園, Nara Kōen) is a large park in central Nara. Established in 1880, it is the location of many of Nara's main attractions including Todaiji, Kasuga Taisha, Kofukuji and the Nara National Museum. It is also home to hundreds of freely roaming deer.

Considered the messengers of the gods, Nara's over 1000 deer have become a symbol of the city and have even been designated as a natural treasure. Deer crackers are for sale around the park, and some deer have learned to bow to visitors to ask to be fed. Nara's deer are surprisingly tame, although they can be aggressive if they think you will feed them, so make sure not to tease them with food.



TODAIJI TEMPLE

Todaiji (東大寺, Tōdaiji, "Great Eastern Temple") is one of Japan's most famous and historically significant temples and a landmark of Nara. The temple was constructed in 752 as the head temple of all provincial Buddhist temples of Japan and grew so powerful that the capital was moved from Nara to Nagaoka in 784 in order to lower the temple's influence on government affairs.



Until recently, Todaiji's main hall, the Daibutsuden (Big Buddha Hall), held the record as the world's largest wooden building, despite the fact that the present reconstruction of 1692 is only two thirds of the original temple hall's size. The massive building houses one of Japan's largest bronze statues of Buddha (Daibutsu). The 15 meters tall, seated Buddha represents Vairocana and is flanked by two Bodhisattvas.

KOFUKUJI TEMPLE



Kofukuji (興福寺, Kōfukuji) used to be the family temple of the Fujiwara, the most powerful aristocratic clan during much of the Nara and Heian Periods. The temple was established in Nara at the same time as the capital in 710. At the height of Fujiwara power, the temple consisted of over 150 buildings.

The temple features several buildings of great historic value, including a five-storied pagoda and a three-storied pagoda. At 50 meters, the five-storied pagoda is Japan's second tallest wooden pagoda, just seven meters shorter than the five-storied pagoda at Kyoto's Toji Temple. Kofukuji's pagoda is both a landmark and symbol of Nara. It was first built in 730, and was most recently rebuilt in 1426. Neither pagoda can be entered by the public.

