

DAY 3 Sendai → Tagajo → Shiogama → Matsushima

3-1 / A visit to Tohoku History Museum

Entry: ADULTS JPY460

STUDENTS (Primary--High School): Free

* CLOSED Mondays



★The museum is out the South exit of Kokufu Tagajo station. After visiting, please walk back through the station to the North exit to begin your walk to Shiogama.

Entrance: Follow the path down 100m and turn right (another 50m) to reach the museum entrance. Pay for you entry and peruse the collection (in chronological order).



HIGHLIGHTS: Though the museum has English written at each exhibit, we offer a brief review of the highlights related to your travels through Tohoku (i.e. Northern Japan):



Just outside the museum (before or after entry) you may make a visit to the Konno family's farmhouse. Built in 1769, it is a good example of traditional architectural techniques, as well as of the wealth of village headman/landowners in the Edo period.



Inside the museum, learn about the indigenous Jomon (14,000-300 BCE) people's lifestyle and art (haniwa pottery, etc.).

→ Continue to learn more about Emishi people and their relationship to the encroaching Yamato influence in the Nara Period (710-794 CE). Take note especially of the *josaku* (castles or fortresses of territorial government offices) information, as you will be passing the remains of Tagajo Castle on your walk.



You may also be interested in the make-up of Sendai (the largest city in Tohoku, which you have passed through by train) as an iconic "castle town", as well as the reference to Basho's route.



Far from the Kyoto capital, learn more about the hardened lives of the Tohoku populace in the Edo period (1603-1868 CE), specifically the farming villages that were forced to carry the brunt of taxation and suffered through repeated famines and disease, often revolting against the establishment. To this day, the subsistence lifestyle and frontier-like mentality gives Tohoku a reputation as being home to a "toughened breed" of Japanese.



Especially if with children, once you have traversed the main exhibits of the museum (including the room on straw divinities, traditionally used to keep away evil spirits), you may also head up to the 3rd floor to experience the interactive space there.



Once you have finished, exit the museum and walk back to Kokufu-Tagajo station (through to the North exit) to begin your main walk for today.



3-2 / Photo: View from the station



3-3 / Photo



3-4 / More info on the remains



Large stones buried here would have been the foundation of an outpost designating the “front” of Tagajo Castle’s territory. Discovered in 1979, the remnants of six structural foundations date back to the mid-9th Century and were thought to be the equivalent of a city hall outpost or administrative center in the area. This outpost would have been run by the *kokushi* 国司, a high-ranking provincial governor under the Heian period’s *ritsuryo* legal system.

/ Basho, Sendai and irises



Basho’s visit to Sendai (and nearby Tagajo, Shiogama and Matsushima) coincided with the peak of the iris season, and as such he would be remiss to mention them here. The sandals gifted him by Kaemon were dyed in the iris’s hue, and the pervading themes of strength and warding away bad luck (associated with the iris leaf/stem’s resemblance to a sword scabbard) would have been apt for the long journey.

Miyagino (Sendai)

We crossed the river Natori and went into Sendai. It was the day when people hang blue irises beneath the eaves. We found an inn where we stayed for four or five days.

In the town, there was a painter called Kaemon. I had heard he was a man of truly artistic taste, and I got to know him. He told me he had spent several years tracing places mentioned in poetry that had become hard to locate; and one day, he took us to see some of them. The fields of the Miyagino were thick with bush clover, and I could imagine the sight in autumn. It was the season when the pieris flowered around Tamada, Yokono, and Tsutsujigaoka. We walked through a pine forest so thick that sunlight could not penetrate at all, and were told its name, Konoshita (Under the trees). The dripping dew must have been heavy there even in ancient times, for in one poem, a servant is asked to tell his lord to take a straw hat. We offered prayers at Yakushido Shrine and the Shrine at Tenjin before the day drew to a close.

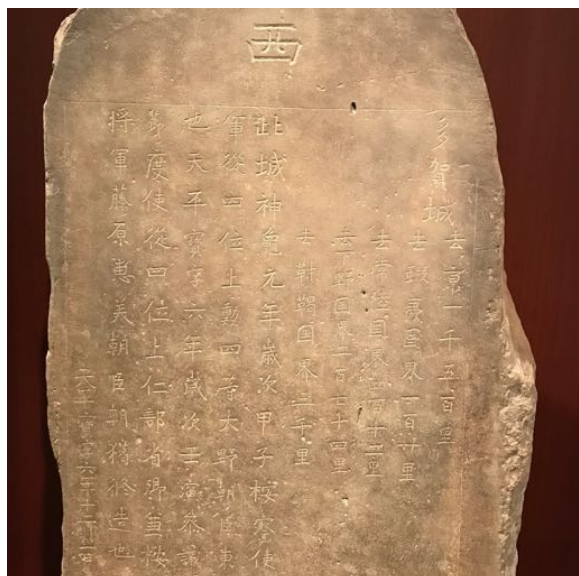
As parting gifts, Kaemon presented us with sketches of Matsushima and Shiogama and various other local places. He also gave us two pairs of straw sandals, with straps deep iris-blue. These presents showed how much a man of cultivated taste he was:

I will bind irises

Blossoms round about my feet –

Straps for my sandals

3-5/ More on Basho and the monument



It was the foundation stone of this interesting fortified government office which held so much importance to Basho - so important that he quotes directly from the stone in an otherwise brief account of his long travels. His interest perhaps was stirred by the fact that this historically vital location (with poems written about the stone by both Saigyō and Minamoto-no-yoritomo, as well as its significance as a symbol of Japan's cultural "frontier") had been so ignored over the centuries. The foundation stone had been pushed over by enemies of the founders and buried face down for centuries and was restored at the instructions of the Emperor who recognised the historical importance of the stone, only about 50 years before Basho and Sora walk past. The stone has recently been proven to be one of three oldest carved stones in Japan and is now a National Treasure. However, there would have been little visible to Basho of the Tagajo fort itself. It would have been covered in cultivated land, only a portion of which has recently been reclaimed and excavated by archaeologists. The main steps leading up to the internal gate were built on by a temple, which was also recently moved off to the side and the steps restored. In fact these roads and steps were covered by a layer of white ash from an eruption in the 10th Century by Mount Towada in Aomori Prefecture - proof that they were built earlier than this.

The stone tablet is today housed in a wooden structure dating back to 1868. Most of the information on it relates to the distances to important centres, the capital, the Korean peninsula, and other nearby prefectures. The actual inscription is: "Distance to Nara, 1500 Ri (802.5 km), Distance to the border of the nation of Emishi (northern barbarian tribes) 120 Ri (64.2 km), Distance to the border of Hitachi County border, 412 Ri (220.4 km), Distance to the border of Shimono County, 274 Ri (146.6km), Dis- tance to the national border with Korea, 3000 Ri (1605 km)."

Basho and the monument (continued)

The distances are measured in 'Ri' – a measurement of 3.7km which is a very familiar distance on the old highways of Japan where a mound and tree are planted every 'Ri'. However, for a brief period in the Tempyo era (when the table was carved), the 'Ri' referred to a distance of 535 metres. To remind about the old Japanese measurement system, one shaku was 29.7 cm, 6 shaku were one bu (written with the Chinese character to walk). This likely related to the length of two human steps. And 300 bu were one ri, or 535 metres. Much of this measurement taking related to human activities so one wonders what it meant to walk 300 steps in the Tempyo era. As opposed to the distance a human can walk in one hour, which is the later accepted (in Japan as opposed to China) of the distance of 3.7km to a Ri.

It is wonderful that Basho has to scrape off the moss from the tablet, unthinkable now that it is a national treasure. It is interesting that one of the characters was only partly visible and Basho incorrectly copies it. It was the character for 'place' (oite) at the bottom of the tablet which Basho copies down as 'sato' (similar meaning to location). Indeed if you look at the top of the character (the bottom half of which was most probably buried in soil) it does look like Sato. We are reminded of the fallible nature of historians and reassured of our right to correct little obvious distortions of history by retracing the steps of Basho. And finally that there is a smaller stone nearby where the original carvers, those many years ago, had worked some graffiti into another stone so they would not be forgotten.

(continued→)