



Ocean views, delicious seafood, rich history,  
and a welcoming community...

That's  
Obama!

The seaside city of Obama may not be as well-known as tourist hubs like Tokyo and Kyoto, but this historical port town has a lot to offer for visitors willing to venture a little ways off the beaten track!

Driving what is now known as the Mackerel Road or taking a train along the scenic Lake Biwa and the Sea of Japan will bring you to Obama City in Fukui Prefecture. It is a small city with a population of just under 30,000 people, and its inhabitants mostly make a living in the agricultural and commercial fishing industries. Local traditional crafts include lacquerware (especially chopsticks!), agate carving, and *washi* papermaking, while popular cuisine features winter crab, *kuzu manjū* sweets, bamboo-pickled sea bream, Yatabe green onions, *ume* plums, and a dizzying variety of mackerel! Seasonal tourism usually consists of beach lovers, autumn color chasers, and seafood connoisseurs, but Obama is worth visiting for its heritage and art as well.

After all, in earlier periods of history when Kyoto was still the capital of Japan, mountain routes to Obama were actually its primary mode of access to the sea. This went beyond just fishing, as Obama also served as the gateway to the Asian mainland. With foreign goods and travelers arriving from abroad to proceed down to Kyoto along with local staple foods such as fish and salt, Obama inevitably absorbed aspects of its trading partners' refined culture, some of which has survived to this day in the form of culinary traditions, architecture, hospitality customs, and festivals.

Keep reading to discover even more about this charming city by the sea!



When you think of major port towns in Japan, you might envision somewhere like Yokohama or Kobe, but until a few centuries ago you would have been thinking of Obama! Situated in Wakasa Province, now Fukui Prefecture, Obama was a bustling seaport that welcomed ships from mainland Asia, serving as an important hub on the trade routes that connected the city of Kyoto with the rest of the world. It was from Obama that the old capital received much of its seafood, carried by men traveling on foot over steep mountain roads. The main catch making its way inland was *saba* (mackerel), which eventually led to the name “the Mackerel Road”.

Wakasa Province was a *miketsukuni*, one of the provinces tasked with providing foodstuffs to the imperial court. But it wasn't only fish being transported along this highway! Metalwork, Buddhist statuary, books, emissaries, and even Japan's first elephant also made their way along Saba Kaidō! In turn, Kyoto's distinct culture made its way to Obama, and these routes to the sea were responsible for bringing religious, festive, and culinary traditions from the old capital that can still be observed in Obama.

### Special Feature

# Saba Kaidō

The Mackerel Road 鯖街道



### Izumi-cho Shopping Street いづみ町商店街

〒917-0084 福井県小浜市小浜広峰  
Obama Hiromine, Obama City

One of the most lasting testaments of this exchange is Obama's high number of Buddhist temples. Normally you wouldn't see nearly as many in a rural area, let alone this amount of precious and well-preserved statues and other treasures! Another is the dining and entertainment district of Nishigumi, where *geiko* (what geisha are called in both Kyoto and Obama) performed for guests at luxury establishments serving elegant cuisine not usually seen outside the capital. Even Kyoto's famous Gion Matsuri festival has been paid homage in the form of Hōze Matsuri, a festival in Obama in which various neighborhoods showcase their floats and performances.

You won't be passing any porters rushing about on foot these days, but you can still explore Saba Kaidō! Izumi-cho, a fishmonger district in central Obama, has a plaque in the street that designates the "official" starting point of the old Mackerel Road, and if you pick up a handy map of the hiking trails, you can head out on a tough but rewarding journey through mountain forests and valley villages between Kyoto and Obama. Those less trek-inclined can still enjoy parts of Saba Kaidō by car, including some gorgeous views from the mountain peaks. Either way, you don't have to carry baskets of mackerel to do it!





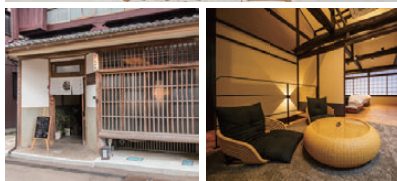
## LOCATIONS

Obama has far more temples and shrines than most countryside areas on account of its history as a trading port. Each of these sites has something for visitors to enjoy, be it a lovely garden, ancient statues, or fascinating local legends.





## Nishigumi District 小浜西組



One of Obama's main attractions is the old Nishigumi district and its scenic Sanchōmachi street. In Obama's bustling port days, sailors and passengers would leave their ships behind for the welcoming warmth of the restaurants, inns, teahouses, and other establishments that lined the streets leading into the city. A concentrated effort has been made to retain the classic architecture from that time, and although many of the buildings now serve as private residences, a variety of guesthouses, cafés, and restaurants are ready to treat visitors with the best of country hospitality.

The Nishigumi district is full of local flavor with its cafés, historical buildings, restaurants, temples, and much more! Take some time to explore on foot and see what you can discover along the way.

This area is convenient for tourists to stay in, particularly if they are traveling on foot. For a taste of what it's like to live in an old-time neighborhood, a local venture called **OBAMA MACHIYA STAY** has renovated several townhouses to the standards of modern convenience while retaining the overall architectural design of an Obama *machiya*. You can rent out the entire **Sanchōmachi Sanoya** property or book a room in the neighboring **Sanchōmachi Nagata** property, which also operates a cozy café out of the first floor. There will be no delay in starting your day when you step out straight into Sanchōmachi!

Wandering through the narrow streets, you'll notice that many buildings have the same decoration dangling near the door. Obama families follow a folk tradition of hanging *migawarizaru*, simple, stuffed cloth figures that represent monkeys, which are thought to protect the household from misfortune. Why monkeys? In Japanese, monkeys are called "*saru*", which happens to have the same pronunciation as the verb "to expel evil". There is even a small **Kōshin-dō** temple filled with handmade *migawarizaru*.

With lots of things to discover in Nishigumi, you won't go hungry either. In front of **Hachiman Shrine** is a former traditional sweets shop turned local bakery called **Cocoro**, ready with delicious pastries and savory breads. If you prefer fine dining and entertainment from an Obama *geiko*, the traditional **ryōtei** restaurant and teahouse **Harima** accepts reservations for meals as well as cultural experiences such as *shamisen* lessons, traditional party games, and rental kimono. **Hōtōrō**, an old luxury restaurant, no longer serves food, but they do open their doors on weekends and holidays to show off the traditional architecture and artwork inside and share the site's fascinating history.

Just as they did centuries before, let Nishigumi and Sanchōmachi lead you farther afield into the culture of Obama!

### Sanchōmachi Sanoya Sanchōmachi Nagata

三丁町のや・三丁町ながた

〒917-0058 福井県小浜市小浜香取13、14  
13 and 14 Obama Katori, Obama City

☎ 0770-56-3366

<https://www.obama-machiya-stay.com/>

### Cocoro Bakery | 石窯パンの郷こころ

〒917-0052 福井県小浜市小浜男山39-2  
39-2 Obama Otokoyama, Obama City

☎ 0770-53-0575

Open: Wednesday – Sunday, 9:30 – 17:00

<https://www.ishigamapancocoro.com/>

### Ryōtei Harima | 料亭播磨

〒917-0058 福井県小浜市小浜香取3  
3 Obama Katori, Obama City

☎ 0770-52-0362 (reservation required)

<https://www.harima-obamageisha.jp>

### Former Ryōtei Hōtōrō | 蓬嶋楼

〒917-0057 福井県小浜市小浜飛鳥64  
64 Obama Asuka, Obama City

☎ 0770-64-6030

Open: Saturday, Sunday, public holidays,

10:00 – 16:00





# Myōtsū-ji Temple 明通寺

The most well-known temple in Obama City is undoubtedly Myōtsū-ji, a Shingon sect temple founded in 806. Situated at the base of a densely forested mountain covered in *hinoki* cypress trees, Myōtsū-ji still evokes the feeling of temples past, removed from the world and surrounded by nature so that monks could devote themselves solely to practicing Buddhism. Though the passage of time has reduced a once sprawling temple complex to relatively smaller precincts, the unadorned simplicity of the ancient wooden buildings makes for a quiet yet striking scene... and if there's a troupe of wild monkeys making their way through, maybe a little less quiet!

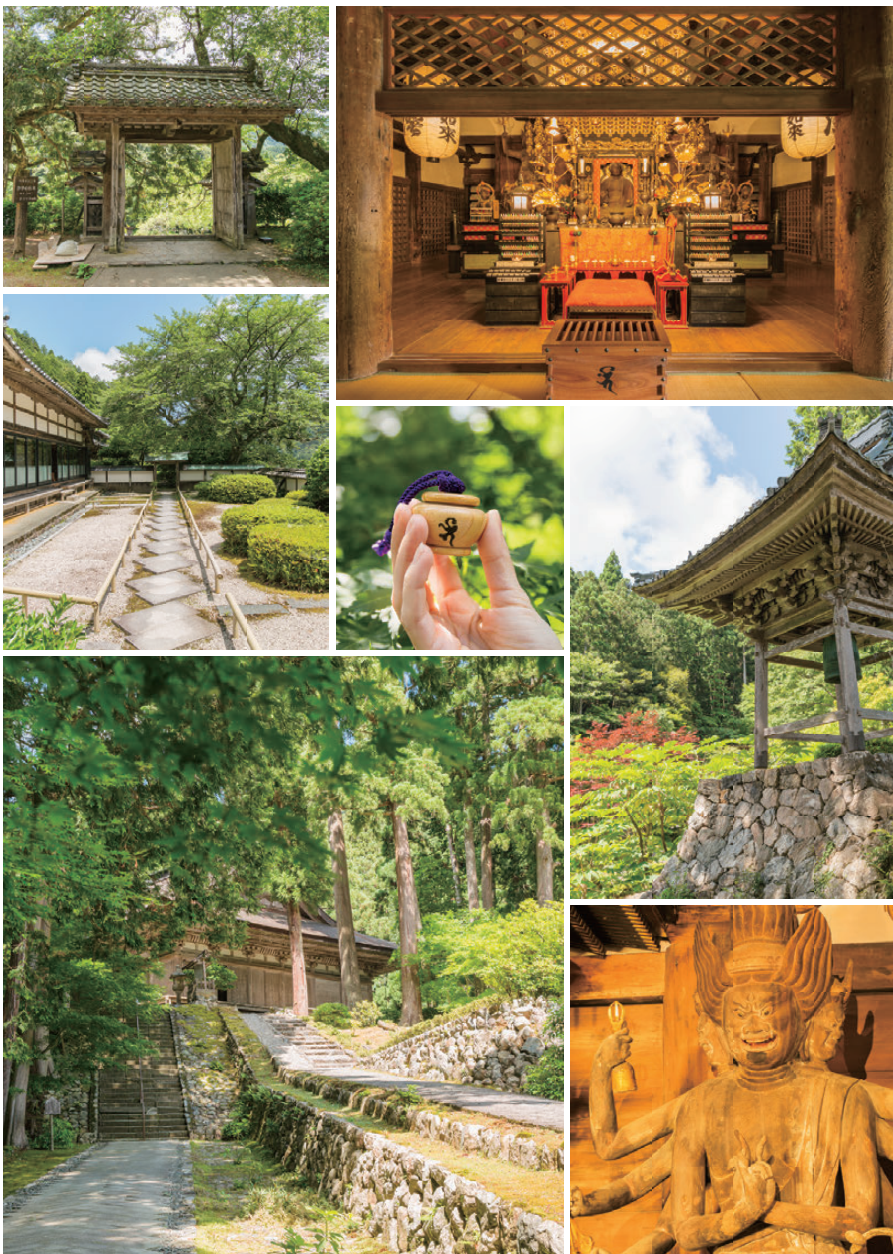


The first site you will encounter approaching Myōtsū-ji is the *sanmon* gate, a wooden structure from 1772 set atop a flight of mossy stone steps. Though the gate itself dates back to an Edo period reconstruction, the two guardians that flank the entrance had their wooden forms and furious expressions carved back in 1264. Just past the gate in a small courtyard you'll find the temple's bell tower, a side garden, and a grand weeping cherry tree that brightens up the precincts with soft pinks each April. More color can be found in one of the temple's three small ponds, home to large *koi* carp who would definitely enjoy some of the food on sale by the water if you choose to indulge them. And while it might not catch your eye at first, don't miss the peculiar broad-leafed and pink-stemmed *yuzuriha* tree marked with a little sign in that same courtyard!

*Yuzuriha* is specifically mentioned in Myōtsū-ji's records, which indicate that the temple was founded by the great general Sakanoue no Tamuramaro (758 – 811). Legend says that he received a divine revelation in a dream that led him to find a certain large *yuzuriha* tree in the mountains where a mysterious old sage made his home. Following the sage's advice to pray for peace throughout the land, Tamuramaro cut down the *yuzuriha* and from its wood carved three Buddhist statues to be enshrined in the temple hall he erected. The statues were of Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha said to cure all ills, Gōzanze Myō-ō, known as the conqueror of greed, hatred, and foolishness, and Jinja Taishō, a guardian said to have aided the famous Chinese monk Xuanzang, whose pilgrimage to India was immortalized in the tale *Journey to the West*.







Versions of these statues created in the late 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as the principal objects of worship within Myōtsū-ji's main hall, with Yakushi Nyorai in the center, Gōzanze Myō-ō on his left, and Jinja Taishō on his right. Since you are allowed to walk through the inner sanctum, you can even examine the awe-inspiring wooden sculptures from up close! These three, as well as a statue of the Immovable Wisdom King Fudō Myō-ō kept in a separate building, are acknowledged by the Japanese government as Important Cultural Properties. If you understand Japanese, you can learn even more about the temple's history, its treasures, and its grounds directly from a monk while you are admiring the statuary.

All it takes is a look around to discover even more of Myōtsū-ji's priceless treasures! The main hall and the 22-meter-tall three-story pagoda beside it, both erected during reconstruction in 1258, are registered as National Treasures. Even though many people assume that Buddhist temples have always been built in austere, natural-toned woods, back in the day they were often covered in colorful lacquer, painted scenes from various sutras, and symbolic mandalas. Though the outside of both structures has indeed turned to weathered wood over time, the paintings and colors inside Myōtsū-ji's pagoda have been preserved remarkably well and can be viewed during special exhibition periods. This usually coincides with the autumn Tenkomori Obama Festa, but make sure to check in advance!

Before you leave, why not try a little prediction for your future? You may have noticed little red mustachioed dolls and small wooden pots scattered around on lanterns and rocks while exploring the grounds. The dolls actually represent the legendary monk Bodhidharma, and the pots are modeled after traditional medicine jars like the one held by Yakushi Nyorai. Sold for ¥300 and ¥600 respectively at the main hall or the ticket counter, each of these ornaments contains an *omikuji* fortune (in Japanese) inside. Some people choose to leave the figurines behind to populate the precincts, but you are more than welcome to take them home as a little reminder of your trip to this historical temple!



### Myōtsū-ji Temple | 明通寺

〒917-0237 福井県小浜市門前5-21

5-21 Monzen, Obama City

☎ 0770-57-1355

Admission: 9:00 – 17:00, ¥500

<https://myotsuji.jimdofree.com/>

Visiting Myōtsū-ji gives a chance to temporarily escape from modern life and take a peek into the past. To quote a Myōtsū-ji monk: "We'd like people to feel that, no matter your religion, this place contains 1,200 years of history, carefully preserved and protected to this day."





## Mantoku-ji Temple 萬徳寺



A quiet temple with rich history, Mantoku-ji experiences a surge in popularity in autumn but is worth visiting year-round. Its architecture, art collection, and magnificent garden make for a very satisfying excursion.

Mantoku-ji temple is most lauded for its garden, which is registered as a National Place of Scenic Beauty. Going through different names, addresses, and sect affiliations in over 800 years of history, Mantoku-ji served as a prayer temple for feudal lords and was recognized as the main Shingon sect temple in Wakasa Province during the Warring States period. In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of *daimyō* Takeda Nobutoyo, it was also a *kakekomi-dera* where women could seek shelter and eventual divorce from their husbands. Now located in the southeastern foothills of Obama, Mantoku-ji is an exquisite example of temple architecture that also boasts a variety of noteworthy artwork and gorgeous views.

The *shoin*, a thatch-roofed building located just inside the temple gate, contains several drawing rooms that offer a splendid garden view and host an interesting assortment of art. The overhead transoms that divide the main rooms are decorated with seasonally-themed Chinese ink paintings drawn about 250 years ago by Sakai Tadatsura, the 9<sup>th</sup> lord of Obama Domain. The *tokonoma* display area of the hall also features a collection of scroll paintings, Buddhist mandalas, and porcelain donated to the temple over the centuries, proof of the patronage it received from important clans in the past.

Mantoku-ji's famous garden, created in 1677, utilizes the natural slope of the temple grounds as a base for carefully placed stones and greenery behind a sea of pale gravel next to the *shoin* hall. Amongst the foliage you can also find the temple's bell tower, a tutelary shrine, and another small hall. Each season brings a different treat, be it the rare five-colored camellia tree in late winter, bright azaleas in spring, or vibrant maples and ginkgo in autumn. Mantoku-ji's garden is considered one of Japan's top 100 spots for viewing autumn foliage!

Past the garden and up a flight of maple-lined stairs is the temple's main hall, which enshrines a seated statue of Amida Nyorai, "the Buddha of immeasurable light and life". This ancient statue was carved in the late Heian period (794 – 1185) and is now a nationally designated Important Cultural Property. Other statues here include Dainichi Nyorai, the Immovable Wisdom King Fudō Myō-ō, and a hidden Horse-headed Kannon.



### Mantoku-ji Temple | 萬徳寺

〒917-0242 福井県小浜市金屋74-23

74-23 Kanaya, Obama City

☎ 0770-56-2308

Admission: 9:00 – 17:00, ¥400

Before you go, make sure to take in the scenic view from the top of the stairs, overlooking the temple grounds as well as the village and the mountains spread out below.





## Wakasahiko Shrine and Wakasahime Shrine

若狭彦神社・若狭姫神社



These shrines are home to two nationally recognized Important Cultural Properties: a Heian period *tachi* blade said to have been forged by the famous swordsmith Sanjō Munechika and a *norito* prayer scroll from 1303.

The preeminent Shinto shrines in Obama are Wakasahiko and Wakasahime, a complex of two shrines founded in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century in dedication to a divine married couple from Japanese mythology. The story goes that the god Hikohohodemi no Mikoto once went fishing with a hook he borrowed from his elder brother... only to end up losing it to a feisty mackerel. When he descended to the Dragon King's palace under the sea to look for the missing hook, he met the beautiful goddess Toyotama-hime, the Dragon King's daughter, whom he promptly married. Once the fishing hook was retrieved, the couple returned to live on the surface, and now the husband is worshiped at Wakasahiko Shrine, while his wife is venerated at Wakasahime. Historically classified as the highest-ranked in the province, these shrines remain a focal point of local celebration in the modern day, hosting weddings, prayers for newborn babies, and coming of age rituals.

As expected of their enshrined deities, Wakasahiko Shrine is most strongly associated with prayers for maritime safety and success in fishing, while Wakasahime Shrine is known as a place to pray for a safe and easy childbirth. Both shrines are built in the classic Shinto architectural style with minimal embellishments, almost blending into the forests that surround them. This feeling of oneness with nature is stronger at the slightly more remote Wakasahiko Shrine, but even Wakasahime, closer to the city and more frequently visited because of the shrine office, still feels tied to both forest and ocean. Ritual *sakaki* trees grow here and there throughout the grounds, locals still come to use the shrine well, and there are large wooden boat models on display that were once offered up by fishermen and merchants in prayer for the safety of their vessels at sea.



### Wakasahiko Shrine | 若狭彦神社

〒917-0243 福井県小浜市竜前28-7  
28-7 Ryūzen, Obama City  
☎ 0770-56-1116  
Admission: Free

The most striking natural feature both shrines have in common is their dramatic trees! Wakasahime Shrine's sacred tree is a venerable cedar that towers over the main sanctuary at a whopping 30 meters tall, while Wakasahiko Shrine boasts a pair of *meoto sugi*, "married cedar trees" that grew so close together their bases fused as one. Trees such as this are said to be charms for good luck in love, which is quite fitting when you think of the legend behind the shrine's founding!



### Wakasahime Shrine | 若狭姫神社

〒917-0241 福井県小浜市遠敷65-41  
65-41 Onyū, Obama City  
☎ 0770-56-1116  
Admission: Free





## Haga-ji Temple 羽賀寺



Kannon is the Buddhist deity of compassion with 33 incarnations to guide and protect humans, and Jūichimen Kannon is said to have 11 heads so that she can see in all directions to find everyone who needs salvation.

According to temple records, in the year 716 a phoenix alighted on a paulownia tree in Obama, leaving behind some feathers. This was regarded as proof of peace throughout the land, and to commemorate the auspicious event Empress Genshō ordered the monk Gyōki to found a temple, which was named Haga-ji with the *kanji* characters for “feather” and “congratulations”. Its records, *Haga-ji Engi*, penned by Prince Masahito with a postscript by Emperor Go-Yōzei, are registered as an Important Cultural Property.

A Shingon sect temple, Haga-ji is renowned for the Buddhist statuary in its main hall, rebuilt after a fire in 1447. The most famous is Jūichimen Kannon (Eleven-headed Kannon), an Important Cultural Property said to have been carved by Gyōki in the image of Empress Genshō herself. Since it was originally kept away from public view, the colorful paint on the wood is remarkably well-preserved. If you lean in, you can still see the delicate patterns on the statue’s clothing! You’ll also notice that its right arm is disproportionately long, representing Kannon’s ability to reach out and save those in need. The richly decorated altar features carved phoenixes and paulownia crests as another reminder of the temple’s origins.

Statues of Bishamonten, the guardian of the north, a Jizō (Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva) said to bless couples with children, a Jizō believed to bestow a long life, and a thousand-armed Kannon originally venerated at another temple are also on display here. Buddhist sutras actually describe 33 incarnations of Kannon, and their depictions line the walls in a corridor behind the main altar. In a side chamber you’ll find two statues of 16<sup>th</sup>-century lords who contributed greatly to the temple’s reconstruction: Andō Chikasue and his son Akita Sanesue. At Haga-ji’s main hall you can also get its newly-designed *goshūin* (¥1,000), special seals inscribed with vermilion and gold ink and decorated with cute images of Jūichimen Kannon or its 33 incarnations. Half of the income is used for temple maintenance and half is directed towards disaster recovery assistance and community development.

Now nestled in the foothills northeast of the city center, Haga-ji was once one of the closest temples to the bustling Obama port, governing 18 sub-temples at the height of its power. Though today its appeal lies in its historical artifacts, don’t forget to savor the temple grounds! The precincts are particularly beautiful in summer when colorful hydrangeas bloom along the pathways.



### Haga-ji Temple | 羽賀寺

〒917-0071 福井県小浜市羽賀83-5

83-5 Haga, Obama City

☎ 0770-52-4502

Admission: 9:00 – 16:00, ¥400





## Jōkō-ji Temple 常高寺

Jōkō-ji is a Rinzai Zen temple revitalized through the efforts of Obama citizens driven to preserve the temple's rich history. Originally built in 1630, Jōkō-ji was founded by a widow named Ohatsu (1570 – 1633) so that she could take the tonsure and pray for the souls of her parents and her husband Kyōgoku Takatsugu, the feudal lord of Obama Domain. Under the name of Jōkō-in, Ohatsu entered the nunnery with seven loyal handmaidens, and at the end of their lives they were all buried in the temple cemetery overlooking Obama Bay.

However, Ohatsu didn't spend all her widowed life cloistered! Her pedigree as the niece of the famous Warring States general Oda Nobunaga allowed her to play an important role in national politics far beyond Obama. With her elder sister Yodogimi married into the Toyotomi clan and younger sister Gō into the Tokugawa clan competing over rule of the country, Ohatsu worked tirelessly to try and maintain peace between the two powers. Because of this her life has been well-studied by historians, and efforts have been taken to preserve and display the relics that remained at Jōkō-ji. These include a wall scroll portrait of Ohatsu, letters written in her hand, gifts from her sisters, and other documents that help tell her story. Japanese speakers even have the chance to listen to the head priest explain the significance of each display if he's available when you visit!

Because the main temple hall was rebuilt from the ground up in 2001, it shines with a relatively modern finish, drawing one's eyes to the sun rays pouring through a dramatic skylight. The *shoin* wing, however, is exactly what one might expect from a historical temple, decorated with ink paintings of nature scenes and Chinese sages. Sitting in these *tatami* mat rooms in quiet contemplation, you can enjoy a view of Jōkō-ji's rear garden undisturbed by crowds.

When it comes to seasonal beauty, though, Jōkō-ji is better known for what's out front! Situated beside the temple bell is a pond that overflows with gorgeous irises in spring, bringing a plethora of colors to the temple grounds. Make sure to admire the old main gate... but be careful passing through! The local train line runs between the gate and the stone steps that lead to it, which can make for quite the dramatic picture of "past meets present".



**Jōkō-ji Temple | 常高寺**

〒917-0055 福井県小浜市小浜浅間1

1 Obama Asama, Obama City

☎ 0770-53-2327

Admission: 9:00 – 16:00, ¥400

<https://jyoukouin.jimdofree.com/>



Jōkō-ji temple is a must-see for fans of Japan's Warring States history. It was a chaotic period between the collapse of one shogunate and the rise of another, but it produced many fascinating historical figures such as Ohatsu.