

Exploring the Nikko Sugi Avenue

**"Step into history along the world's longest avenue of trees,
officially recognized by Guinness World Records."**

Origins of the Nikko *Sugi* Avenue

For centuries, pilgrims have traveled the three tree-lined roads that lead to Nikko Toshogu Shrine. Today, 12,042 towering *sugi* cedar trees line the roads, which stretch over 35 kilometers end to end. But who planted so many trees, and why?

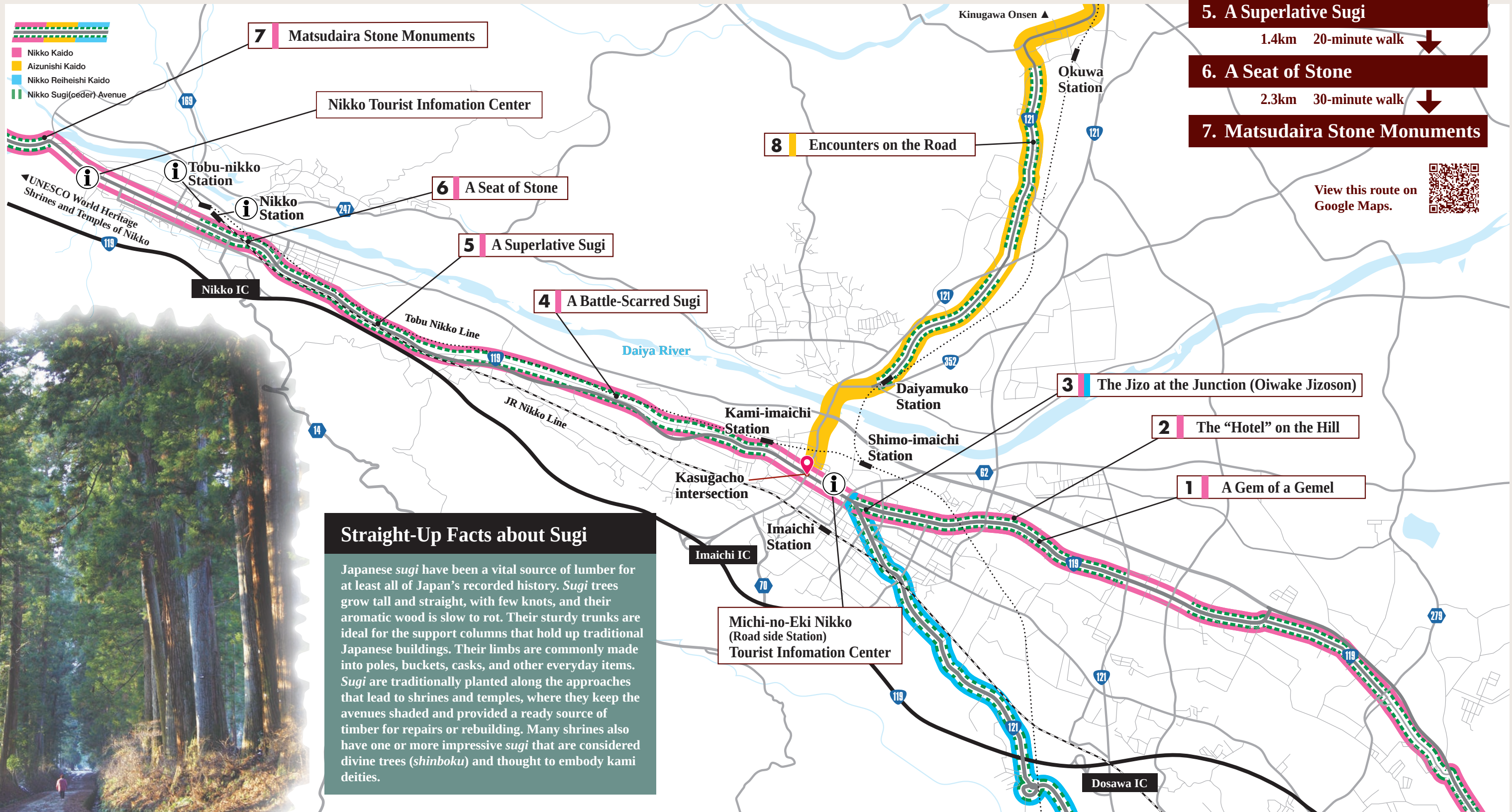
The creation of the Nikko *Sugi* Avenue, as the three roads are collectively called, began nine years after the death of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). Ieyasu was the first of the Tokugawa shoguns who ruled Japan for over 250 years. After his death, Ieyasu was enshrined at Nikko Toshosha Shrine. Between 1617 and 1843, 19 official visits were made by the Tokugawa shoguns.

In 1625, Matsudaira Masatsuna (1576–1648), lord of Tamanawa domain, began the project of planting 50,000 trees along the roads to Nikko Toshosha, in conjunction with massive renovations to the shrine. The renovations were completed and the shrine was renamed Toshogu in 1645. Masatsuna had managed the collection and conservation of Ieyasu's personal effects after his death and wanted to do something to memorialize Ieyasu. It took more than two decades to finish the roadworks and the planting, but the project was completed in 1648, just in time for the thirty-third anniversary of Ieyasu's death.

Walking Trail

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- 1. A Gem of a Gemel**
290m 4-minute walk
- 2. The “Hotel” on the Hill**
1.5km 20-minute walk
- 3. The Jizo at the Junction(Oiwake Jizoson)**
2.5km 33-minute walk
- 4. A Battle-Scarred Sugi**
2.4km 30-minute walk
- 5. A Superlative Sugi**
1.4km 20-minute walk
- 6. A Seat of Stone**
2.3km 30-minute walk
- 7. Matsudaira Stone Monuments**

View this route on Google Maps.



Exploring the Nikko Sugi Avenue



1 A Gem of a Gemel

In spring, pink cherry blossoms can be found among the stately evergreens that line one of the roads to Nikko Toshogu. Upon close inspection, the flowers seem to grow from the branches of a *sugi* tree. But how is this possible? This exceedingly rare type of tree, called a “gemel,” is formed when a pair of trees become symbiotically fused. This particular gemel was formed when a cherry tree sprouted from inside the bark of the *sugi*.



2 The “Hotel” on the Hill

This distinctive *sugi* tree sits atop a hill about 250 meters east of the intersection of National Routes 119 and 461. This hill served an important purpose during the Edo period (1603–1867), when distance was measured in units called *ri*. Like mile markers, hills were built every *ri* (every 3.9 kilometers) from the capital at Edo (now Tokyo). The tree growing on the hill has been hollowed out by a fungus, creating a “hotel” for passing travelers caught in the rain or snow.



3 The Jizo at the Junction (Oiwake Jizoson)

This statue is enshrined at the intersection of the historic Nikko and Reiheishi roads, but it was not originally placed there. According to legend, it originally was one of the Jizo statues that line the path along the Daiya River (about 10 kilometers to the northwest). The legend says that it was discovered by a local stonemason after a large flood. While quarrying rock, he struck a boulder and was astonished to see blood leaking from the chisel mark. When the boulder was unearthed, it was revealed to be a statue of the bodhisattva Jizo, protector of children and travelers. With help from the entire village, the 2.9-meter-tall, 8-metric-ton statue was carried here—or so the story goes.



4 A Battle-Scarred Sugi

These three *sugi* trees stand fused together just south of Nikko Daiyagawa Park. Take a careful look at the upper trunk of the leftmost tree, and you will see the aftermath of an ambush. Two long, vertical scars mark the site where a cannonball tore through the tree’s side more than 150 years ago. The shot came from a battalion of samurai revolutionaries led by Itagaki Taisuke (1837–1919), in pursuit of Tokugawa government troops during the civil war that ended the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). The Tokugawa forces were retreating to Nikko Toshogu Shrine to fortify it for a final stand. Taking advantage of the blind curve in the road, the rear scouts lay in wait, firing a volley of shots at the approaching samurai. The revolutionaries returned fire, and a pitched battle ensued.



Fearing that Nikko Toshogu would be destroyed in the fighting, Itagaki allowed the Tokugawa forces to withdraw, and the shrine was saved.

5 A Superlative Sugi

At 38 meters, this towering *sugi* tree is the tallest of any tree along the avenue. The people of Nikko have dubbed it “Taro,” a hardy but unassuming name traditionally given to a family’s eldest son. This tall tree, however, is actually the second to be given that name. The original Taro was an even taller tree that stood nearby, but it was struck by lightning and cut down.



6 A Seat of Stone

It is easy to miss this smooth seat carved into a boulder just a short distance southwest of Nikko Station. The seat was specially made for Dr. Erwin Bälz (1849–1913), a German physician who spent 29 years in Japan. Bälz visited Nikko multiple times. During his visits, he often walked along the tree-lined avenues, admiring the towering *sugi*. He evidently had wished for a convenient place to sit and regard the swaying canopy during his daily walk, and so the “foreigner’s stone” (*ijinseki*) was carved for him.



7 Matsudaira Stone Monuments

Matsudaira Masatsuna (1576–1648), lord of Tamanawa domain, is the father of the Nikko Sugi Avenue. At great expense, he and his son Masanobu (1621–1693) spent more than 20 years directing the planting of tens of thousands of *sugi* trees and landscaping the route to Nikko Toshogu Shrine. Masanobu recorded this achievement on four stone monuments. One monument stands near Shinkyo Bridge, at the entrance to the sacred area that contains Nikko Toshogu Shrine. The three others mark the start of each of the three tree-lined roads.



8 Encounters on the Road

This stretch of road has a rare feature: a secondary tree-lined lane that runs parallel to the main avenue. The additional lane allowed two daimyo processions to pass each other coming and going along the Aizu-Nishi Kaido Road. When samurai lords traveled, whether visiting Nikko Toshogu or journeying to and from the capital at Edo, they traveled in style. Their parade-like retinues of soldiers, officials, footmen, and other servants numbered in the hundreds if not thousands. Common people were expected to step off the road and show deference as a procession passed. But what if two lords met each other? In that case, the lower-ranking lord was expected to move his retinue off the road and wait politely as his superior passed by. Three eminent branches of the ruling Tokugawa family kept residences near Nikko Toshogu, and this “shoulder” likely prevented awkward encounters between daimyo processions. It is also thought to have been used by other travelers on the road to rest or avoid poor weather.



Saving the Sugi

When the avenues to Nikko Toshogu were completed almost four centuries ago, some 50,000 *sugi* trees lined the shady lanes. As of 2025, that number has dwindled to only 12,042. Some trees were toppled by lightning, wind, or other natural forces, but the largest losses have been in the name of infrastructure. In the decades since the construction of National Highways 119 and 121, over 4,000 *sugi* trees have died or been cut down. In 2019, the prefectural government stepped up its conservation efforts to prevent further loss.

The goal is simple: protect and preserve the remaining trees. To do so, widespread action is necessary, from large measures like the creation of a bypass to move traffic away from the avenues to smaller-scale measures such as replacing dilapidated embankment walls and burying concrete frames to protect the trees’ roots. Each year, over 100 volunteers work to cut back intrusive vegetation, cover exposed roots, and ensure the trees remain healthy.

How Can I Help?

You can help protect the *sugi* trees without pulling weeds or shoveling soil. Since 1996, certain trees have been made available for “adoption” by organizations and individual donors. Each tree that is adopted is fitted with a plaque bearing the name of its benefactor. The money raised through adoption is put into a trust, and the resulting interest is used to pay for the conservation work. If the sponsor elects to return stewardship of their tree, they are given a full refund of their initial donation.

