

A NEW PILGRIMAGE ROUTE IN KYUSHU, JAPAN

福音 La 之道 Via del Vangelo



THE KAGOSHIMA
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The Way of Angelo Orsucci

Ōmura was a castle town of Ōmura Sumitada, the first Christian daimyo in Japan, under whose rule a vibrant Christian culture flourished. Sumitada donated the parts of Nagasaki and Nagai to the Society of Jesus as trading ports, making an extraordinary contribution to the flow of international culture into and out of Japan. He was also one of the three lords who sent the Tenshō Embassy on its historic journey to Rome. During the period of prohibition, a prison known as Susuta Jail was established here, where many martyrs spent their final hours. From Ōmura, we trace the path taken by the Twenty-Six Martyrs as they made their way toward Nagasaki, boarding a boat bound for Tsutsu — and we too sail from here across the water to Tsutsu.

The way of Alessandro Volignano

The Ōshima area preserves many historic sites from the height of Christian influence in Japan. There is much to explore here: the castle ruins of the Ōshima clan — the lords most closely allied with Church — the Ōshima Seminary where the Tenshō Embassy boys studied before their journey to Europe, and the Kirishitan Museum. The highlight of this area is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hara Castle Ruins, where 38,000 Christians made their last stand, calling out for freedom of faith in what became the largest uprising of the Edo period. In the end, all but one of those who held the castle were massacred — an event that left deep trauma not only among Christians, but also among Buddhists and Shinto followers, scarring the nation at a collective level. Because almost all those involved were killed, the full details of this uprising remain unresolved to this day. The second half of this section follows a trail of Kirishitan gravestones toward Ōmura.

The Way of Luis Fróis

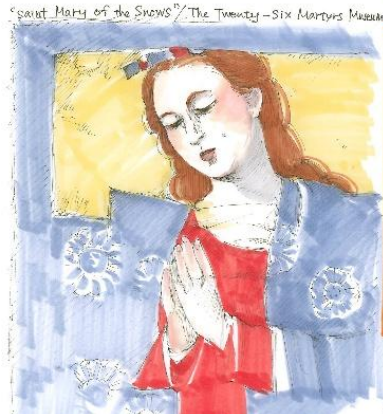
From Tsutsu, the route passes through martyrs' graves, the ruins of former churches, and the Urakami Cathedral, leading pilgrims into Nagasaki — the spiritual heart of Japanese Catholicism. Nagasaki was home to the Jesuit "Cape Church" (Misaki no Kyōka), and it was here that Luis Fróis, secretary of the Society of Jesus, documented the lives of the church and its faithful in vivid detail, sending his accounts back to Europe. His monumental work *Historia de Japan* continues to bring that era to life for readers today. Fróis passed away in Nagasaki, though his grave has never been found. Directly across from the site of the Cape Church stands Dejima — the meticulously restored artificial island that served as Japan's sole official point of contact with the outside world during the Edo period — offering a vivid window into that remarkable era. The pilgrimage route then continues to the Twenty-Six Martyrs Memorial Museum on Nishizaka Hill, the site of numerous martyrdoms, where visitors can bear witness to the profound gravity of the executions of the Twenty-Six Martyrs and the great Martyrdom of Genji. Finally, pilgrims make their way to Ōura Cathedral — known as the site of the "Discovery of Hidden Christians" — where, reflecting on two hundred years of Senboku Kirishitan history kept quietly alive, the long journey comes to its end.

The Way of Luis de Almeida

Stepping into Amakusa, one may sense an immediate and welcome shift in the air — a relaxed, open spirit that Europeans often liken to Naples. This archipelago was home to Jesuit cultural and educational institutions such as the Kowachinoura Collegio, the Sinki Seminary, and a printing press. At its height, it was said that "No one but Christians and merchants may enter the island" — a testament to how deeply the Christian faith had taken root here. Most remarkable of all is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sakitsu settlement, where despite bounties of millions of men placed on the discovery of Christians, a rare and extraordinary history unfolded: followers of Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity sheltered one another. Luis de Almeida — the Jesuit priest known as "Living wheels," who laid the foundations of modern medicine in Japan — chose Amakusa, governed by his close friend Amakusa Shigekisa, as his final resting place. Perhaps he too was drawn to the remarkable spirit of tolerance that defined this land. Within the islands of Amakusa, pilgrims can still visit the untouched forest grave of a hidden Christian-era priest (a site known through oral tradition) and the secret spring where Christians once drew holy water.

The Way of Francis Xavier

The first half of this route follows in the footsteps of Francis Xavier, beginning from the place where he came ashore by ship, continuing to Ippin castle where he had his first audience with the lord of Kagoshima, Shimazu Takahisa, and passing through ancient highways that trace his journey. Along the way, pilgrims will encounter Francis Xavier Church, Xavier Memorial Park, and winding paths that retain the atmosphere of a bygone era. Nearby is also said to be the grave of Yajiro — the man believed to have brought Xavier to Japan. The second half of the route visits the Catholic Sendai Church, which houses a memorial tower for Saishō Shichisuewa, the first martyr of Kagoshima, as well as the ruins of the early 17th-century Kyōdōmari Church. Kagoshima was one of the most challenging regions for Christian missionary work in the 16th and 17th centuries — particularly in Xavier's earliest days, when evangelization met with great difficulty. Yet perhaps the rich natural landscape of Kagoshima, shaped by its volcanoes and the Kuroshio Current, offered some consolation to those who walked these paths.



Saint Mary of the Snows / The Twenty-Six Martyrs Museum