

# The Tōkaidō Road: Connecting Japan

When the Tokugawa shogunate moved the political center of Japan from the ancient imperial capital of Kyoto to Edo (modern Tokyo), the Tōkaidō (“Eastern Sea Route”) connecting the two cities took on a special prominence. One of several major highways, the Tōkaidō was the route used to transport the shogun’s annual official tribute to the emperor—a symbolic offering of white horses. There was also a steady stream of daimyo processions, sometimes with as many as 2,000 retainers, along the Tōkaidō. Daimyo were regional lords who were required to alternate their residences between Edo and their fiefdoms, leaving their immediate families hostage in the new capital.

Non-official traffic—of pilgrims, merchants and other travelers—also increased rapidly when travel restrictions were eased in the late Edo period. The travel boom led to new towns springing up along the road, all with inns, teahouses, restaurants, and souvenir shops. At the same time, illustrated guidebooks, travel literature and fiction, and art depicting famous locations around the country were issued to meet the demands of an audience eager for information about the Japan beyond the narrow confines of their homes.

The young Utagawa School artist Hiroshige (1797-1858), still in his thirties, collaborated with the publisher Hoeidō in about 1833 to release the single print series *The Fifty-Three Stations of Tōkaidō Road*. The phenomenal success of the series instantly vaulted Hiroshige to fame and established him as one of the foremost print artists of the late Edo period. Hiroshige would return to the Tōkaidō theme repeatedly. His output for the rest of his life was dominated by prints depicting locations of natural beauty and special interest all over Japan. Hiroshige is now internationally recognized as the ultimate expression of a distinctly “Japanese” artistic sensibility.