

## **TITLE: About the Nyonin Michi (Women’s Pilgrimage Route)**

### **What Is the Nyonin Michi (Women’s Pilgrimage Route)?**

The Women’s Pilgrimage Route, or Nyonin Michi, is the route female pilgrims once used to circumnavigate Koyasan, which follows a 16-km course through the mountains encircling the sacred plateau. Koyasan is home to over a hundred Shingon Buddhist temples, as well as the Danjo Garan Sacred Temple Complex, Okunoin cemetery, and the mausoleum (*Gobyō*) of Kobo Daishi (also known as Kukai, 774–835), the Japanese priest who brought Shingon esoteric Buddhism to Japan from China and founded Koyasan. The Nyonin Michi connects a number of historical routes once used to access and circumnavigate the Koyasan plateau. Today, visitors can walk a number of these routes, including the Nyonindo Halls Course, the Koya Sanzan Course, and the Fudozaka Course, to experience the history of Koyasan more closely.

### **The History of the Nyonin Michi and the Nyonindo Halls**

The Nyonin Michi routes came into heavy use during the Edo period (1603–1867), when these mountain paths functioned primarily as pilgrimage routes and access points for Koyasan. These routes also served as important transportation routes, connecting towns and villages on all sides of the sacred mountain. Seven official “gates” (*guchi*) along the Nyonin Michi functioned as entrances to Koyasan at various places along the trail. Small buildings, known as *nyonindo* halls or women’s halls, were constructed at each of these locations, as well as at one additional location along the pilgrimage route. The *nyonindo* halls were meeting and resting points, as well as lodgings, although most of the halls were barely large enough for several people to sleep in side by side. Today, only one of these halls remains: the restored Fudozaka Guchi Nyonindo Hall, which is adjacent to the first bus stop after Koyasan Station. However, markers at the locations where the other *nyonindo* halls once stood contain unique information about the halls, the Nyonin Michi, and the natural history of Koyasan.

The precise locations of the gates and women’s halls occasionally shifted in response to ecological changes and the needs of the people who used the routes. However, the seven gates and the Nyonin Michi remained the primary access points for Koyasan until after the start of the Meiji period (1868–1912). While portions of the route now follow the paved roads through Koyasan, many parts retain their original character as forested walking trails.

### **A Vital Religious and Transport Route**

The Nyonin Michi was used by men and women of all ages, both for religious pilgrimages and for the transportation of goods. The route is called the Nyonin Michi (lit., Women’s Road) because religious restrictions prohibited women from entering the sacred precincts of Koyasan until the Meiji period. Before that time, this route was the closest approach that women could make to the sacred

plateau. Many women climbed the holy mountain and walked the Nyonin Michi, both to worship and to get as close as possible to relatives living and studying at Koyasan. While the women could not descend to the plateau itself, they could “visit” by walking the pilgrimage route, listening to the temple bells, and looking down on the buildings of Koyasan from viewpoints along the Nyonin Michi.

### **Experience the Beauty and History of Koyasan**

While some of the historical views are now obscured by Koyasan’s protected pines and cedars, visitors to Nyonin Michi can still observe Koyasan’s temples and numerous views of the sacred peaks of Mt. Tenjiku, Mt. Yoryu, and Mt. Mani. Also known as the “Koyasan Sanzan,” or Three Mountains of Koyasan, these sacred peaks are believed to stand guard over Kobo Daishi as he continues his eternal meditation at Okunoin. Hikers can hear the temple bells at various times throughout the day, and the flowers and foliage of the Nyonin Michi’s mountain trails are unique and beautiful in every season.

In addition to offering walks through protected forests and important historical sites, the Nyonin Michi gives visitors a rare opportunity to follow in the footsteps of centuries of Japanese pilgrims, travelers, and priests.