

Kumano Magaibutsu: Buddhist Art on a Cliff Face

Two of the most awe-inspiring stone carvings in Bungo Takada are the Kumano Magaibutsu, monumental bas-reliefs of Buddhist deities. Viewing these carvings requires a certain amount of effort, as they are located on a cliff wall in the mountains. The steps on the route are a seemingly haphazard grouping of stones that grow steeper as you climb, a pattern blamed by local lore on a rush job performed overnight by an ogre eager for a promised meal of human flesh. But the reward for making the climb is worth the effort: the two images are stunning, made all the more spectacular by their isolated location.

The first image to catch the eye is that of Fudo Myo-o, measuring over eight meters in height, and probably dating from the end of the Heian period (794–1185). Off to the right, and clearly a relief of higher quality, is a figure of Dainichi Nyorai, sometimes called the Cosmic Buddha. This carving measures some 6.8 meters and dates from the mid-Heian period. Looking carefully, you can see three mandala that were carved above the head. Both of these figures are powerful icons of Esoteric Buddhism, in which paradise is achieved through arduous practice and secret teachings. A Shinto shrine is located a bit further up the steps, and the spot is also a trailhead for one of the routes of the Long Trail.

(Note: Walking sticks are available at the entrance to the climb, and come in handy on both ascent and descent.)