

Kinpusenji Temple

This seventh-century temple is located high on the ridgeline of Yoshinoyama. For centuries, Kinpusenji has been the head temple of Shugendo, a form of mountain worship that combines ancient Japanese nature worship, Buddhist beliefs, and Taoism. The temple is believed to have been established by En no Gyoja (634–701), the founder of the religion. Kinpusenji is still an essential base for the many Shugendo practitioners who undertake the arduous trail to Mt. Sanjogatake.

The Zaodo, or main hall, is the second-largest traditional wooden building in Japan after the Great Buddha Hall of Todaiji Temple in Nara, and houses three towering statues of Zao Gongen, avatars of the Buddhist deities of the past, present, and future. These designated National Treasures are only occasionally exhibited to the public.

Yoshinoyama has been a famous area for cherry blossom viewing since the Heian period (794–1185), and spring is considered one of the best seasons to visit. In May, after the blossoms have fallen, the Shugendo season begins. From then until September, the temple reverberates with the bellows of conch-shell horns sounded by *yamabushi* (Shugendo practitioners) in traditional garb as they tackle their strenuous ascetic training on Mt. Sanjogatake.

Kinpusenji Temple is an important site within the “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range,” designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004.