

【Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage: Historical Overview】

The Chichibu pilgrimage route is one part of the 100 Kannon Pilgrimage, three connected paths that link 100 temples across the regions of Chichibu, Bandō, and Saikoku. The 100 Kannon Pilgrimage route stretches some 1,200 kilometers, from Seigantoji Temple in Wakayama Prefecture to Suisenji Temple in the town of Minano, near Chichibu. Each of the temples along the route enshrine a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon, Goddess of Compassion. A stele discovered in the ruins of Iwao Castle, in Nagano, is inscribed with writing that indicates pilgrims have been traveling the route since at least 1525. However, the route may have existed even centuries earlier. A collection of folktales from the Heian period (794–1185) mentions a “man who cleansed himself and made offerings at 100 shrines to Kannon on the eighteenth of each month.”

In the *Lotus Sutra*, a fundamental piece of scripture in many schools of Buddhism, Kannon is portrayed in 33 different forms. Before the 100 Kannon Pilgrimage was established, each of the three pilgrimage routes visited 33 statues of Kannon. Sometime around the early sixteenth century, a thirty-fourth temple (Shinfukuji, #2) was added to the Chichibu pilgrimage to create a single, unbroken route of 100 temples.

Although the Bandō and Saikoku pilgrimages can take weeks to complete, the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage is popular for being less strenuous. The Chichibu pilgrimage is tightly grouped within the Chichibu Basin and can be completed in just a few days. The route is about 90 kilometers long, and some portions can even be traveled by car.

Particularly during Japan’s medieval period (twelfth to sixteenth centuries), travel between regions was tightly controlled. The Chichibu route, being so compact, did not require travelers to pass through any checkpoints, and it was very popular with pilgrims. Even after the start of the Edo period (1603–1867), when travel restrictions were relaxed, the Chichibu pilgrimage remained popular.

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, worship of Kannon became fashionable, and the 34 Kannon Pilgrimage Route experienced a boom in popularity. Several times during the eighteenth century, the 34 Kannon statues were publicly displayed in Edo (now Tokyo), and the interest generated by these exhibitions led to an explosion in the number of pilgrims who traveled to Chichibu. Every day between 1804 and 1830, some 20,000 to 30,000 pilgrims were recorded on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage. This popularity has remained strong even to the present day: Over 180,000 people were recorded on the Chichibu pilgrimage route between April and June of 1996,

when all 34 temples were opened up to display the Kannon statues inside.

Although many aspects of pilgrimage culture, such as the clothing and other accoutrements, have become codified by tradition, the routes themselves do not need to be completed in any prescribed order. Pilgrims can follow the order of the temple numbers (*jun-uchi*), start at the final temple and work backward (*gyaku-uchi*), or travel in any other order. Along the way, it is customary to collect a record of your visit to each temple, most often in the form of a stamp (*goshuin*) in a special notebook. Temples also commonly sell small protective charms (*omamori*) that bestow a variety of boons and benefits.