

## The Sacred Routes of Shugendo: Pilgrimages to Koyasan and Kumano

If you walk the mountain trails of the Kii Peninsula east of Osaka, you can hear the sound of conch horns echoing through the woods. This is the sound of *yamabushi*, the practitioners of the belief system known as Shugendo, who blow these shells as they make their pilgrimages through the mountains. Pilgrimages through the wilderness are an essential part of Shugendo, a faith blending Shinto, Buddhism and mountain worship. The Koyasan Route and the Kumano Route, two important routes in the discipline of Shugendo, attract spiritual devotees and casual hikers, who can enjoy the magnificent mountain vistas along these routes.

Located in Wakayama Prefecture, Mt. Koya, or Koyasan, is a mountaintop religious retreat established in 819 by the Buddhist monk Kukai (also known as Kobo Daishi; 774–835), one of Japan's most venerated religious figures. With its complex of temples, schools, and the large graveyard Okunoin, Koyasan has served for centuries as a place of spiritual purification and learning. Although seven mountain trails lead to Koyasan, the Koyasan Choishi Michi Pilgrimage Route is one of the most important for mountain ascetics. Created in the ninth century, it is the original access route to Koyasan. The route stretches about 24 kilometers from Kudoyama to Okunoin and takes some 7 hours to complete. Beginning at Kudoyama Station on Nankai Electric Railway's Koya Line, the route goes northwest to Jisonin Temple, which has a memorial hall built by Kukai in honor of his mother and a statue of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, which is now a National Treasure.

Jisonin had also been the traditional beginning of the route, which soon turns southward and ascends into the mountains. The Choishi Michi is named for the 180 stone stupas that line the path. Placed there in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), these stupas symbolize five-storied pagodas, which are tall, slender buildings serving as repositories for relics of the historical Buddha. The trail continues to such landmarks as the Niutsuhime Jinja Shrine, said to be established some 1,700 years ago, and now the chief sanctuary of about 180 shrines throughout Japan that are dedicated to the female Shinto deity Niutsuhime. Farther along the trail, the Daimon Gate is a multi-storied, 315-year-old structure with the second-largest statues of Nio guardian kings in Japan. It stands at the entrance to the Koyasan complex, which was built in the shape of a lotus flower mandala. At the center of the mandala is the Konpon Daito, a 50-meter-high pagoda only 500 meters beyond the gate.

Another key Shugendo pilgrimage is the Kumano Sankeimichi Nakahechi Route, also known as the Imperial Route. It is one of the paths in the Kumano Kodo network of trails that wind through the mountains in the lower part of the Kii Peninsula. The Kumano Kodo routes bring practitioners to the places considered the dwellings of the gods and to the three grand Shinto shrines of Kumano: Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Nachi Taisha, and Kumano Hayatama Taisha. This group of sanctuaries is also linked to Koyasan via the Kumano Sankeimichi Kohechi path and to Yoshino via the Omine Okugakemichi path; both paths are used by *yamabushi* Shugendo practitioners. All these sites were added to the UNESCO World Heritage roster in 2004 as the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range. The Kumano shrines, like Shugendo itself, reflect the fusion of Shinto, the ancient native beliefs focused on nature worship, with Buddhism, which was imported from China and Korea. This combination has produced unique objects of worship such as Shugendo's Zao Gongen, a manifestation of three Buddhist deities with origins in an amalgamation of Shinto gods.

Stretching across southern Wakayama Prefecture, the Nakahechi Route is a multi-day, 38-kilometer trek requiring six to seven hours each day. It begins at Takijiri-oji and goes up into the mountains before arriving at Kumano Hongu Taisha, which is roughly in the middle of the peninsula. From there, two branches of the route descend toward the Pacific coast: one going toward Kumano Hayatama Taisha and another toward Kumano Nachi Taisha. Each of the shrines has a spectacular natural setting and unique features. To reach Kumano Hongu Taisha, visitors pass through Kumano Nachi Taisha, Japan's largest torii gate, which is close to the magnificent Nachi-no-taki, Japan's tallest waterfall. Kumano Hayatama Taisha is home to Japan's oldest conifer, an Asian bayberry tree said to be 1,000 years old. The Shugendo pilgrimage routes of Nara and Wakayama Prefectures enable travelers to experience the spiritual and natural worlds.