

Kukai and Kagawa

The Buddhist priest Kukai (774–835) is undoubtedly Kagawa’s most famous son, and remains a significant presence in the region even today. Born into the aristocratic Saeki family in Sanuki province (present-day Kagawa Prefecture), on the site of what is now Zentsuji Temple, Kukai developed a deep interest in Buddhism. He studied in China for two years, focusing on esoteric teachings. On his return to Japan he founded the Shingon school of Buddhism. Kukai’s accomplishments earned him the posthumous title of Kobo Daishi, or “Grand Master of Buddhist Teaching.”

A well-known figure in Japanese history, Kukai is respected throughout the country but has a special place in the hearts of many in Kagawa. This is mainly due to his fabled role in establishing the Shikoku Pilgrimage, a 1,200-kilometer course that requires pilgrims to visit 88 temples in places allegedly visited by Kukai. While the historical record suggests that the pilgrimage only began to take shape in the fourteenth century, its legendary association with Kukai is strong. The Shikoku 88-Temple Pilgrimage has for centuries been the primary attraction for visitors to the region.