

Seiganto-ji Temple

Seiganto-ji is a temple of the Tendai school of Buddhism. It is part of the Nachisan complex, and has special significance as the first stop on the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage, a circuit of 33 statues of Kannon, bodhisattva of compassion. “Saigoku” means “western provinces,” and indicates that the sites to be visited are all in the area generally equivalent to what is known today as Kansai. The Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage was traveled by pilgrims as early as the Heian period (794–1185), when it was popular among retired emperors and members of the aristocracy.

A Syncretic Institution

Until the end of the Edo period (1603–1867), Seiganto-ji and Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine formed a single Shinto-Buddhist syncretic institution known as Nachisan. This ended when the new Meiji government ordered strict separation of shrines from Buddhist temples, and the priests were forced to depart the premises. In 1874, the priests were granted permission to use the vacant hall as a new temple called Seiganto-ji, literally “Temple of Passage to the Blue Shore.”

The Sanmon (Mountain Gate) was built in 1933, and is notable for the rare combination of Buddhist guardian deities (Nio) and *komainu* lions, which are the guardians of Shinto shrines. The photogenic three-storied pagoda dates to 1972, but it is considered a rebuilt version of a similar structure that burned down in 1581.

The Waniguchi Slit Gong

Seiganto-ji also has the world’s largest *waniguchi*, a kind of slit gong whose name literally means “crocodile mouth.” The *waniguchi* at Seiganto-ji is 1.4 meters across and weighs 450 kilograms. It hangs just inside the entrance to the temple’s main hall.