

## **Moja-no-Deai: The Abode of the Dead**

There is a section of the Ogumotori-goe route, between Funami-toge Pass and Irokawa-tsuji, that forms a valley path paved with stone and lined with thin ranks of Japanese cedars. This area is called Moja-no-Deai—the Abode of the Dead. According to legend (and eyewitness accounts even from recent travelers), those who walk this path may meet deceased acquaintances and relatives coming from the opposite direction.

### *Yomi, the Land of the Dead*

Kumano has been associated with the afterlife since ancient times. The mountainous terrain made the area inaccessible and mysterious, even though it was near the capital. According to the eighth-century chronicle *Nihon shoki*, Kumano is where the deity Izanami was laid to rest, and where her husband, Izanagi, followed her into the Land of Yomi, where departed souls resided.

Mountains have always been objects of reverence and awe in Japan, and mountaintops have been seen as places where the boundary between this world and the next is blurred. With the arrival of Buddhism, many mountains became home to temples and their cemeteries, reinforcing the connection. This belief proved especially powerful in Kumano, and most of all at Amida-ji Temple on Mt. Myohozan. According to tradition, every last person who dies in Japan visits this temple before moving on to the next plane.

### *The Perils of Pilgrimage*

The Kumano Kodo could be dangerous in medieval times. Trekking in the mountains before modern facilities and medicine became available was a serious challenge, and pilgrims faced injury or death en route. There are many unobtrusive markers and statues of Buddhist deities placed by the side of the trail in remembrance of the unfortunate.

There were also tales of spirits called *gaki* (the “hungry ghosts” of Buddhism) or *daru*, which possessed travelers on the steep paths, sapping their energy until they collapsed and expired on the spot, only to become *daru* themselves. Pilgrims were warned to always carry a small amount of extra food, as even a mouthful could provide the energy to fend off *daru* long enough to get to safety.

### *Meeting the Departed*

Tales of encounters in the Abode of the Dead tend to follow a pattern. As the pilgrim safely descends from Funami-toge Pass to more level ground, they start to relax. The wind changes, or perhaps a mist rises, and they see another figure coming toward them on the path far ahead. As the figure approaches, the pilgrim realizes it is a deceased friend or relative. However, if they attempt to acknowledge or speak to the figure, it vanishes.

In some accounts, the pilgrim meets a person they believe to be alive. When they return home, however, they discover that the person had already passed away at the time of their encounter. The pilgrim had met a soul on its way to Amida-ji to ring the temple bell before moving on to the next world.