

Suruda-toge Pass on the Ohechi Pilgrimage Route

Suruda-toge is a mountain pass in the Yukawa district of Nachi-Katsuura, and is notable as the setting for an unusually large number of legends. The pass is part of the Ohechi pilgrimage route that runs along the coast.

The entrance to the pass from the north is next to a hotel on National Route 42. At its southern end, it passes through the grounds of a private residence with a lumber yard before rejoining Route 42. Sections of the pass are included in the Kumano Kodo UNESCO World Heritage listing. It takes less than an hour to walk from end to end.

Kasu Jizo and the Old Well

About halfway through the pass is a large cut through the top of the mountain. On the west side of the path is a *shimenawa* rope between two trees, which forms a torii-like entrance. Beyond this, marked by red banners, rise the stairs to a statue called the Kasu Jizo.

According to local legend, a visiting Heian noblewoman named Princess Utako died while climbing this pass on a pilgrimage to Kumano Kodo. As a memorial to the princess, a small worship hall was built above the pass and dedicated to Jizo, the bodhisattva who watches over travelers.

The legend attributes the name Kasu Jizo to Princess Utako's fondness for sake lees (*kasu*). Today, however, the name is written with characters that mean "more life" rather than "sake lees," and worshipers come to pray for relief from back, leg, and fertility problems. The Hime Matsuri (Princess Festival) is held here every November, and features prayer, parades, music, and dances in period costume.

Halfway up the stairs to the Kasu Jizo is another small statue of Jizo. This is also said to commemorate Princess Utako, although the legend is vague on the details. Not far from the base of the stairs stands an old well. According to tradition, it was dug as an act of gratitude by a man whose mother regained the use of her legs after he carried her on his back to pray at the Kasu Jizo.