

Hall of the Thirty-Three Kannon Pilgrimage

This modest hall contains statues of the 33 forms of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who has vowed to guide all sentient beings to salvation. The hall fulfills an important role as a miniaturized version of the “Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan” (Saikoku Sanjūsansho), a pilgrimage route that has been traveled for more than a millennium. Engyōji is the twenty-seventh destination along the route, which spans 1,000 kilometers and seven prefectures.

The Saikoku Sanjūsansho pilgrimage was established in the late Heian period (794–1185), but it was not until the Edo period (1603–1867) that it became widely popular. According to a passage in the Lotus Sutra, taking refuge in Kannon’s salvation will allow anyone to overcome great hardship, and those who visit all 33 sites of the pilgrimage are said to accumulate merit toward rebirth in the Pure Land, a paradise where enlightenment is assured. Belief in the Pure Land was especially widespread during the Edo period.

However, pilgrimages are long, difficult, and traditionally completed on foot, and during the Edo period, travel between regions was heavily regulated. From early on, the difficulty of these trips inspired enterprising monks to compress entire pilgrimage routes, or portions of them, into “duplicate sites” (*utsushi reijō*), single locations that could be visited in lieu of traveling to dozens of separate temples. Pilgrims who come to Engyōji can worship all 33 manifestations of Kannon at once, effectively completing the entire pilgrimage at one time, and receive the associated merit toward their next rebirth.