

Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan

Engyōji is the twenty-seventh stop along a pilgrimage route that stretches over 1,000 kilometers and spans seven prefectures in central Japan. The Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan (Saikoku Sanjūsansho) is a circuit of 33 temples that was established in the eighth century and continues to be one of the most popular and well-traveled pilgrimage routes in the country. Each temple enshrines an image of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It is said that pilgrims can accrue tremendous merit toward their next rebirth by visiting each one of the 33 sites along the route. Maniden Hall is one of these 33 locations. It enshrines a statue of the six-armed Nyoirin Kannon carved by the abbot Myōkaku in 1239.

Until the adoption of modern conveniences such as cars and ropeways, pilgrims visited each of the 33 sites on foot, and it was not unusual for people to die along the way. From early on, the difficulty of completing pilgrimages inspired enterprising monks to find ways of compressing those long journeys into single, easily visited locations called “duplicate holy sites” (*utsushi reijō*). One such site exists at Engyōji, near the foot of the stone steps that lead to Maniden Hall. This small hall, called the Hall of the Thirty-three Kannon Pilgrimage, holds miniature images of all 33 forms of Kannon, thus enabling pilgrims to complete the entire journey in a single visit.