

Zuikozan Kiyomizudera Temple (Yasugi Kiyomizudera Temple)

Zuikozan Kiyomizudera is a Buddhist temple in an isolated mountain glen in the eastern part of the city of Yasugi. The temple is reached by a long stone stairway through the forested valley, spanned by weathered gates and flanked at key points by stone lanterns. The temple's main hall, three-story pagoda, and other structures are built on terraces connected by the long stone stairway. A 1,000-year-old cedar tree dominates the approach to the main hall.

The Legend of Kannon

Zuikozan Kiyomizudera belongs to the Tendai sect of Zen Buddhism; people come here to pray for relief from bad luck. According to legend, the mountain where the temple stands was once an eerie forest where a supernatural shaft of light would appear at night, frightening local villagers. An itinerant priest named Sonryu was asked to discover the source of the light, and while he was searching deep in the forest, an old man appeared before him. The old man said that he had been worshipping Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, for many years, but was ready to move on to the next life, and was searching for someone to continue his practice. Sonryu agreed to take on the task, whereupon the old man presented him with a sacred statue of Kannon, the goddess of mercy. The priest built a simple thatched hut to enshrine the statue, and though the mountain was devoid of water sources, after a week of secret praying, a spring of clear water appeared nearby. This was the origin of Zuikozan Kiyomizudera, which to this day is devoted to Kannon. The name of the temple comes from these two miraculous occurrences: *zuiko* means "fortunate light," and *kiyomizu* means "clear water."

Imperial Patronage

Historical records seem to indicate that the temple was founded in 587, but the actual date is uncertain. It was fortunate to receive the patronage of Empress Suiko soon after its founding, and later from powerful regional lords. At its peak it had 48 buildings, though now it has fewer than 10. The first large main hall (*konpon-do*) at the temple was built prior to 1393 and was enlarged several times over the centuries. It is built of cedar, and contains a devotional statue of Kannon of unknown date which is usually kept hidden inside an elaborate lacquered cabinet. Statues of the four Shitenno divine guardians that were made during the Heian period (794–1185) stand on either side. When reconstruction was done on the *konpon-do* in 1992, research confirmed that the current building is the fifth and largest to stand in this location.

A three-story pagoda dating from 1859 stands on a high stone terrace a short distance away. It is constructed of hard zelkova (*keyaki*) wood, which is not often used in this region for pagoda construction. While the local carpenter who built it was not trained in pagoda construction, his skill can be seen in the intricately carved dragons peering out from between the brackets under the eaves. Visitors are allowed to climb to the uppermost story, which is usually not allowed in Japan. A modern treasure house (*hozo*) displays important artwork and ritual artifacts belonging to the temple, and Zen meditation is practiced at the *konpondo*.