

## **History of the Shikoku Pilgrimage**

Shikoku has been a pilgrimage destination for more than a thousand years. In ancient times, the island was an extremely remote region that was difficult to reach from any direction. This made it attractive for some ascetics, who sought to instill themselves with spiritual discipline by spending extended periods of time in challenging conditions, far from civilization, at the edge of the known world.

According to legend, one of these early devotees was the Buddhist priest Kukai (774–835), the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism and a native of Shikoku, who is said to have traveled around the island in the ninth century. The disciples of Kukai, who is also known by his posthumous title of Kobo Daishi, or “Grand Master of Buddhist Teaching,” began to follow in their master’s footsteps. The earliest records of these pilgrimages, undertaken only by a small number of highly devoted monks, date to the twelfth century. Temples were founded in places associated with Kukai, and by the fifteenth century these had come to number more than a hundred. The first mentions of an 88-site pilgrimage also date to this period, but why that number was chosen is not entirely clear. The reason most commonly given is that, in Buddhist teaching, humans are believed to suffer from 88 worldly desires.

The Shikoku Pilgrimage as it is known today emerged in the Edo period (1603–1867), a time of peace during which cultural and religious pursuits flourished. In 1687, a lay Buddhist preacher named Shinnen, who had visited Shikoku and its temples more than 20 times during his lifetime, published a pilgrim’s guidebook to the island. Titled *Shikoku henro michishirube* (Guide to the Shikoku Pilgrimage), this book was the first to describe an 88-temple pilgrimage route around the island, numbering each temple and providing practical guidance for pilgrims. Shinnen made promoting the pilgrimage his life’s work: he erected some 200 stone signposts around Shikoku to guide pilgrims from one temple to the next. His efforts and those of like-minded priests helped spread the word about the 88-temple test of faith among the general public, and the pilgrimage gradually became a journey anyone could undertake.

Making the pilgrimage in the Edo period still required significant commitment and financial resources, but its popularity continued to grow among people searching for salvation, forgiveness, or meaning in life, or desiring to escape from sickness or persecution. Government policy also played a part: in the Edo period, ordinary people were generally prohibited from leaving their place of residence, but an exception was made for pilgrims. Devotees around the country established pilgrimage-focused congregations, pooling their resources so that one or two members could undertake the once-in-a-lifetime journey around Shikoku. The popularity of the pilgrimage has fluctuated over the centuries, decreasing during times of unrest and war, but its essential character has not changed much since the seventeenth century. Most of the temples listed in the *Shikoku henro michishirube* are still included among the 88, and Shinnen’s signposts still help pilgrims—be they traveling on foot, by car, or by train—find their way.