

Clothing and Equipment

There are no absolute requirements with regard to clothing and equipment on the Shikoku Pilgrimage, but participants are encouraged to wear the white vest or jacket, sedge hat, stole, and other trappings that distinguish them as pilgrims. These can be purchased at many of the larger temples on the island, including Ryozenji, in Naruto, Tokushima. This is temple number 1 on the pilgrimage, and is where most pilgrims begin their journey. The following are some of the items you may want to acquire:

White vest or jacket (hakue)

Pilgrims traditionally wore all-white clothing, but nowadays many simply wear a vest or jacket over everyday attire. These garments have the mantra of Kobo Daishi, who is worshiped as the founder of the pilgrimage, written on the back. The color white represents purity and innocence, but it also has the meaning of being prepared for death. In the past, traveling to remote Shikoku and undertaking the pilgrimage could be a matter of life and death, and many pilgrims indeed passed away along the route.

Sedge hat (sugegasa)

The sedge hat is worn mainly as protection from the elements. It is inscribed with the name of Kobo Daishi, written with a bonji, or Sanskrit letter, and five phrases that express his teachings. The hat is usually worn with the bonji facing forward.

Walking stick (kongozue)

The walking stick or staff is considered a pilgrim's most prized possession because it symbolizes Kobo Daishi and serves as a reminder that the founder of the pilgrimage is watching over you. The base of the staff is washed at the end of each day. The pilgrims of old would do this to symbolically wash the "feet" of Kobo Daishi before washing their own feet when preparing to enter an inn to rest for the evening. The staff should be treated with care, and can be placed in a special rack at temples during prayer. In the past, it was also used to mark the graves of pilgrims who had passed away during their journey. After the pilgrimage has been completed, the staff can be left at the last temple (Okuboji, number 88), or kept for future use or as a souvenir.

Stole (wagesa)

A thin piece of cloth worn around the neck, the wagesa is a simplified version of a Buddhist priest's robes. Devout pilgrims consider it an essential accessory when visiting a temple. The wagesa should be taken off while eating or using the restroom.

Prayer beads (nenju/juzu)

In Buddhism, prayer beads are used mainly to keep count when reciting sutras or chanting. Priests and many devotees also rub the beads together before and after reciting or chanting as a sign to the deity they are addressing. A string usually has 108 beads, one for each of the 108 afflictions or negative emotions described in Buddhist scripture. When prayer beads are grasped with both hands, they should be held with the right middle finger and the left index finger. When held in only one hand, they should be rolled up into two loops, and three loops when placed somewhere or stored.

Name slips (osamefuda)

These paper slips are the religious equivalent of a business card: pilgrims write their name, address, and wishes on the slip and place it into a box at both the main and Daishi halls of each temple they visit. This act announces one's arrival to the deity. Name slips are also exchanged among pilgrims and given to local residents as gratitude for their hospitality. The standard slip is white, but individuals who have completed the pilgrimage a certain number of times use colored paper: green for at least 5 times, red for 7 to 24 times, and so on. Those who have prayed at all 88 temples at least 100 times are granted the right to use a specially designed, highly ornate type. Name slips are sold in packs of 100 and can be purchased at most temples.

Other essentials

Pilgrims will need candles and incense to burn at each temple, a lighter or matches, and, last but not least, a nokyocho notebook for temple stamps and calligraphy.

Bag (zutabukuro)

The white pilgrim's bag is convenient for carrying one's nokyocho, candles and incense, name slips, and other equipment.