

Mine no Ura

Buddhist monks and mountain ascetics meditated and trained in the area known as Mine no Ura for more than a thousand years. The area's natural and historic religious sites are connected by a hiking path accessible via trailheads at Senjuin Kannon-do Temple and Yamadera Cemetery.

Senjuin Kannon-do Temple enshrines Senju Kannon, the thousand-armed form of the bodhisattva of compassion. It is the second stop on a local pilgrimage of 33 temples dedicated to Kannon. Visitors can enter the main hall to pay their respects and offer a donation. Displayed on the walls inside are paper talismans (*ofuda*) of various colors. Pilgrims write a prayer on these strips of paper and hang them on the walls of each temple along the route. The color of the talisman shows how many times a pilgrim has completed the journey; gold seals, which indicate over 10 circuits, are exceedingly rare.

From the temple, a short stroll through the forest leads to Tarumizu, a site that was used for ascetic practices until the early 1900s. The site is marked by a hollow in a massive rock wall dotted with honeycomb-like depressions that formed through erosion by water. The torii gate of Furumine Shrine stands inside, along with a small shrine to the harvest deity, Inari. Beyond the hollow, next to a towering cedar tree, there is a gated cleft in the cliff. Inside is a statue of the Buddhist deity Fudo Myo-o, the Immovable Wisdom King.

Farther along, the trail becomes overgrown and more difficult to traverse. Along the path are seven rocks known as the Shiro-iwa Nana-iwa, so-named because they resemble the outer walls of a *shiro* (castle) when viewed together from afar. Some of the rocks provide a commanding view of the surrounding valley.

Beyond the Shiro-iwa Nana-iwa, the trail leads to an open clearing with several distinct rock formations. The area was likely used by ascetics for rituals. A small cave past the clearing contains stone *gorinto* (five-ringed tower) grave markers. There used to be more, but over the years many *gorinto* were taken away or collapsed. Some that remain date from the Kamakura period (1185–1333).

The former location of Mine no Ura's main temple is in another clearing, near the Yamadera Cemetery trailhead. The temple honored Amida Nyorai, the Buddha of Infinite Light. Though the structure no longer remains, an archeological dig of the site unearthed parts of the temple's foundation, artifacts dating back to the fourteenth century, and remnants of pottery from the Jomon period (10,000–300 BCE).

The final stretch of the trail leads from the temple ruins to the Yamadera Cemetery. This was the approach to Mine no Ura's main temple, and two engraved stones mark the entrance to the grounds. One stone represents Gozutenko, a bull-headed guardian deity. The other represents Shinbonyoten, one of the attendants of the Thousand-Armed Kannon. The Yamadera temple complex is a short walk from the cemetery.