

Yoshiminedera Temple

Yoshiminedera is a Tendai school Buddhist temple located in the forested mountains of Oharano in southwestern Kyoto. It is one of the 33 temples on the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage, a route connecting a series of temples in the Kansai area dedicated to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion. Numerous cherry trees, hydrangeas, and maples cover the extensive grounds of Yoshiminedera, adding color to the scenery throughout the year. Due to the high elevation, several spots throughout the temple offer scenic views of the city of Kyoto.

History

Yoshiminedera was founded in 1029 by Gensan (983–1099), a monk from Enryakuji Temple on Mt. Hiei, who came to the mountains southwest of Kyoto looking for a sacred place to build a retreat. According to legend, when Gensan stopped to rest, a deity appeared and asked him to found a temple at that location. Construction on rocky ground proved difficult, but Gensan received a vision in a dream that help would soon arrive. The next night, a group of wild boars crushed the rocks with their tusks and leveled the site. Gensan carved a statue of the Thousand-Armed Kannon and built a small temple that he named Hokkein to enshrine it. The name was changed to Yoshiminedera in 1034, when Emperor Go-Ichijo (1008–1036) decreed that prayers for the protection of the country should be held there. With the patronage of the court, Yoshiminedera became a sprawling temple complex that included over 50 subtemples.

Many temple structures burned down during the Onin War (1467–1477), a shogunate succession dispute that damaged much of Kyoto. Later, Keishoin (1627–1705), the Kyoto-born mother of the fifth Tokugawa shogun, Tsunayoshi, greatly contributed to the revival of Yoshiminedera by financing the construction of various halls and donating valuable furnishings. Many of the current buildings date to that reconstruction period.

Temple Grounds

The grounds of Yoshiminedera cover nearly 10 hectares. The main route leads through the large Niomon Gate to the Kannondo Hall, and from there branching paths continue to other structures on the mountainside, such as the Sutra Repository, the Founder's Hall, the Shakado Hall, and the Yakushido Hall.

The Kannondo Hall houses the temple's principal object of worship, an eleventh-century statue of Kannon in the thousand-armed form. It symbolizes the bodhisattva reaching out to help people in need with whatever tool they might require to find relief from suffering. Praying at the Shakado Hall that enshrines a statue of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni is said to alleviate lower back pain or neuralgia, which is considered unusual for blessings typically bestowed by this deity. The Yakushido Hall, standing at one of the highest points in the precincts, is dedicated to Yakushi Buddha, the deity of medicine. It is said that Keishoin's parents prayed to Yakushi Buddha on this mountain for the birth of a daughter. At Yoshiminedera, the deity is worshipped as Shusse Yakushi ("Yakushi of success"), reflecting Keishoin's rise from the daughter of a commoner to the mother of a shogun.

One of the many other interesting sights is a five-needle white pine tree called Yuryu no Matsu ("playful dragon pine"), which is thought to be over 600 years old. It is carefully cultivated to grow horizontally on wooden supports, passing over a set of stone steps. The pine tree is approximately 37 meters long and is a nationally designated Natural Monument.

Seasonal Beauty

Yoshiminedera is well known as a place of beautiful seasonal landscapes, with everchanging views of the Kyoto basin from the Nishiyama mountains and a wide variety of plants blooming on the grounds for most of the year. In springtime, cherry blossoms are the most popular, and about a hundred weeping cherry, mountain cherry, *botan* cherry, and *higan* cherry trees grow in the Hakusan Sakura and Hydrangea Garden and beside the temple halls. The oldest weeping cherry tree is said to have been planted by the temple's benefactor, Keishoin, in the late seventeenth century. Pink *ume* plum flowers bloom before the cherry blossom season, and later the temple grounds become dotted with vibrant azaleas and large peonies.

In early summer, thousands of hydrangeas in the garden and throughout the temple precincts burst into bloom, filling the mountain slopes of Yoshiminedera with blue, purple, and pink. The large, round flowerheads can be observed from above on the viewing platform where the statue of Shiawase Jizo, a bodhisattva said to bless worshippers with happiness, is located, or up close while wandering the garden's curving paths. Once the heat of the summer fades and the chill turns the foliage of the maple trees, visitors head to Yoshiminedera to look at bright autumn leaves covering the mountainside.